

⊗ ⊗ The Chinese Box

Lilas Spencer, her husband Gregory and her Aunt Edith lead a well-ordered, prosperous life on nineteenth-century San Francisco's Nob Hill. Then out of the past comes sailing disreputable Randall Spencer, back from the China whither he was banished years ago.

BY KATHERINE WIGMORE EYRE:

The Lute and the Glove

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Chinese Box

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THE PAST COMES BACK and back on nights when I let myself listen to the wind. As I lie quietly, not to waken the man whose dark head is close on the pillow next to mine, I stare into blackness peopled and furnished with kaleidoscopic, crowding memories.

I am on Nob Hill once again, in a bedroom whose lace-curtained shutter-hung windows overlook the bay. Somewhere off Land's End a buoy moans, and a fog bell, tolling mournfully, signals across unseen water I know to be as pewter-gray as the swirling, muffling sea mist that has drifted in from beyond the Gate.

As I look from the windows, I can only guess where the blotted-out, dark line of the Embarcadero curves. But it is down there, below the cobbled hills, where streets end and wooden wharves begin. And I tell myself a familiar ship is again tied at her snug pierside berth, her canvas furled, her deck undulating gently to the quiet *lap, lap*, of tide-water against her oak hull.

' The *Star of China* in home port once more, her bowsprit rimed with salt, the gilded carving of her dragon figure-head dulled by the spray of open seas. And because, in my memories, a wind soughs nightly through the *Star's* stripped square-rigged, towering masts, I can hear it soughing, too, through the dark swaying boughs of tall eucalyptus trees at the foot of a garden. It is then that the soughing of wind gives way, momentarily, to another sound: the clamor of a bronze gong in Aunt Edith Spencer's downstairs hall announcing dinner.

The gong had sounded—*bong, bong*—on a certain evening late in January while I stood in front of a mirror in Gregory's and my bedroom and slipped a gold bangle on each wrist. Gregory, already shaved and changed, had laced the strings of my French stays, kissed the nape of my neck, and hooked me into a plum-colored faille that had been part of my last year's trousseau.

Aunty had gone down already. We had imagined, and felt sorry for, her ponderous, difficult descent, her labored breathing, her impatient grumblings when she had to pause for a rest on the landing and lean heavily on her cane as well as on the arm of Nellie, the upstairs maid.

"Almost ready, darling?" Gregory asked. I fumbled hurriedly with the little chains and clasps of my bracelets. Gregory disliked tardiness. He intensely disliked anything that was not well ordered or correct or conventional. Astonishing, then, his fondness for me, I used to think. It was absurd, I sometimes smiled to myself, his quiet, contained evenness contrasted with my up-and-down mercurial moods. But we balanced well. The old story of the attraction of opposites, I supposed.

I saw us both in the pier glass that reflected flaring gaslights and our wide brass bed, canopied and draped with

crimson velvet that matched the tasseled window swags." There we were, Gregory and I, cousins—distant cousins—as well as husband and wife. Gregory, tall and suave, his face thin, his cheekbones high, his nose strong-bridged. A dark-haired man with a rather infrequent narrow-lipped smile that could warm to sudden astonishing sweetness, and with dark eyes that looked at most people with cool, level directness, and at me with ardor, more often than not, and with affection at all times.

My own eyes were gray. Moonstone gray. No, I was not being fanciful. I had once heard them so described, and I had never forgotten. I had tried often enough.

My hair, long and thick, sleekly brushed and drawn into a heavy loose coil on my neck, was as black as Gregory's, and if my lips were a shade more full than his, the bones of our faces, the planes and hollows, were molded in duplicate. My nose was better, perhaps—better, that is, for a woman—as thin and straight as Gregory's, but smaller.

Strong resemblances had always run through the family, according to Aunt Edith, who was a Spencer cousin herself, with "Aunt" or "Aunty" only titles she had taught us to use when we were children.

Gregory and I had been orphaned by the same accident. I was four years old and he was eight when our young and carefree parents were killed in the Italian train wreck that brought their gay, congenial Grand Tour to its end. Conscientious Aunty, loving Aunty, who had never married, took us to live with her, and as far as either Gregory or I knew, we were the last of the Spencers. "Aunt Edith is the Queen, and you are the Princess, and I am the Prince," he explained to me. "But someday I shall be the King." And in peaceful, happy ignorance we had the nursery to ourselves for two years until that other black-haired cousin,

that untamable, incalculable boy who was to share our childhood and forever twist and wrack the serenity of our lives, appeared out of nowhere, like a sudden dark storm blowing up on the horizon.

Aunty's big white house stood, handsomely cupolaed and turreted, on a cobbled hill. The wide view of the bay and the Gate could be seen only when the thick blinds that kept sunlight from fading the elegance of carpets and upholstery were pulled up and layers of rich smothering curtains pushed aside. A splendid, if dank-smelling and steamy, conservatory full of ferns and palms, and centered with a dripping mossy-lipped fountain, bulged off the dining room. The drawing room was velvet and plush, satin and horsehair and mirrors. A stained-glass window high on the landing of a black oak staircase mottled the front hall with mote beams the same dark blue and red and purple as the Oriental rugs on its polished floor.

Outside, a pair of iron mastiffs were fiercely watchful on a close-clipped lawn swept free of leaves by a Chinese gardener with a bamboo rake. A spiked iron fence separated the lawns from the sidewalk, and iron urns massed with pink geraniums and stiff pink begonias stood on either side of black-and-white checkerboard marble steps that were never anything but wet and slippery, either from scrubbing water or fog.

The Spencer mansion. . . . Gregory and I both felt an obligation to stay on in it after we were married. Gregory was everything to Aunty. He was the head of her household, just as he was the head of Spencer and Company, Ltd., the shipping firm she had inherited from her father.

"I don't know what I would do without you—what I ever would have done, dear boy," she told him fondly, over and over.

I, too, wondered what I would have done without Gregory, a rock of dependability, a rock of trust and loyalty and devotion.

On that particular early spring evening when I had been tardy about my dressing, we went downstairs with linked arms to join Aunty in the drawing room. Gregory had a whisky toddy, and then we went in to dinner. While poor palsied Aunty sopped bread in her soup and lifted an unsteady, spilling spoon to her mouth, and while we pretended not to notice the dribble down the front of her black-silk and jet-bead bodice, Gregory and I discussed the Subscription Ball to be given at the Palace Hotel the following evening, and our own dinner party beforehand.

So usual, so normal, a discussion—but our last, ever, without strain, without murky undercurrents.

We finished a blancmange, and Lew, our Chinese house boy, was passing fruit and walnuts and port sent up on the dumb-waiter by old Sang in the kitchen, when the front doorbell rang. A determined ring, it struck me. I was quartering an apple. I can see it on one of Aunty's pretty plates. I can see the little pearl-handled knife and fork I was using. Our eyes all turned involuntarily toward the dining-room doorway that led to the front hall. Norah, the parlormaid waitress, was talking to someone. There was a masculine voice, and then with a swish of starched apron strings and cap streamers, Norah was back in the dining room, announcing to Gregory, "A gentleman to see you, sir. To see all of you. 'Miss Edith and Mr. and Mrs. Spencer' was who he asked for, sir."

Gregory frowned his annoyance. "Not precisely the usual hour for a caller. Why didn't you say we were at dinner?"

"I did, sir. 'The family is at table,' is what I said right off at the door, but he pushed in, and said he would wait.

'I'll just come in and make myself at home,' he said, sir. 'Things look pretty much the same, except for you. You're new in the house, aren't you?' And then what does he do, sir, but walk straight into the drawing room, like it was his own house. . . ."

"But who is he? He gave you his name, surely?"

"Only in a kind of way, sir. 'Tell them it's Randall,' was how he put it. 'Randall, back from Canton. They'll know.' "

"Good God!" Gregory threw down his napkin. He pushed away from the table and was on his feet.

"Randall?" I echoed it in a gasp of disbelief. My fruit knife and fork clattered to my plate. Norah's big blue Irish eyes were on us, all lively interest, all frank curiosity. But the swift, shocked disbelief, as devastating as mine, and the livid hate that had flashed across Gregory's off-guard face, was gone instantly. In seconds his eyes were undisturbed, his mouth faintly curved with a contemptuous amusement he turned to share with me before he smiled down the table at Aunty.

"Did you hear, Aunt Edith? Did you hear who Norah says is in the drawing room? Our rolling stone seems to have turned up."

"What say, dear? What about the drawing room?"

"I said our rolling stone has turned up. Randall is back. Shall we go in and—welcome him?"

The cold, deliberate sarcasm was lost on Norah, but just as lost on Aunty. As Gregory helped her out of a chair, her face was puckered with an effort to concentrate. "Randall, did you say? But Randall went away, Gregory. He went away on a ship. He has been gone a long time. A very long time."

"You are quite right, Aunt Edith." Gregory gave a nod of quick tactful reassurance. "He went to China."

"Did he? Let me just think . . . yes. Yes, of course. I remember perfectly."

She didn't, not really. Mercifully, this had been one of her "tired" days. My hands had clenched in my lap as I listened to Norah. My heart lurched sickeningly and began to pound. When I got up from the table, my knees were nothing. I clutched at a chair back. Randall. Randall, the disgraced, unrepentant boy Aunty had sent away eight years ago last September. An outsider from the beginning. A trouble-making, heartbreaking intruder. A boy beyond the pale.

But he wouldn't be a boy now.

I made myself follow Aunty and Gregory into the drawing room. Gregory would know what to do and say. Gregory would get us through.

The man staring into the drawing-room fire with his back to us swung around quickly at the rustle of Aunty's and my skirts. For a moment he stood facing us, easily, insolently, his wide shoulders against the mantel, his face a rogue's face. Dark-skinned. Swarthy, almost. Mobile. Aware. And if my eyes were moonstone gray, his were agate as he stepped forward to kiss Aunty on a soft, sagging cheek criss-crossed with wrinkles. "My apologies to all of you if I have interrupted dinner." He offered it as coolly as though we had said a good-by to him only yesterday, with nothing of pain or shame about it, nothing of an irrevocable ending. "The prodigal home again. Or the black sheep, whichever your choice. But your same Randall—and you my same Aunt Edith, here in the drawing room, with your black silk and your jet. You have no idea how often I've thought of you."

He glanced at Gregory. "I have thought about you, too, my dear cousin. And you don't seem to have changed either; Gregory the Righteous and Great, still reigning."

A slow dark flush suffused Gregory's face, but he made no retort. I was standing by a table crowded with the pretty, foolish trivia Aunty adored. A lace fan. A Staffordshire lamb. A silver paper cutter. A Dresden bonbon dish. I clutched at the rim of the table as I had clutched a moment earlier at the solid back of a dining-room chair. My knuckles were white.

Randall, home. He had invaded Aunty's house the first time like a gust of wind, and here he was again, bringing a salt breath of the sea with him, assaulting me with memories of what I had once been. The child, Lilas, her hair blowing free as she laughed and shouted above the glorious crash of green waves, racing barefoot, bare-legged, her skirts bundled high, over sand and spray-wet rocks, and gathering shells and kelp fronds, and picking yellow lupine from a cliffside.

My mouth hurt again. I remembered a kiss, hard as a bruise.

"What about me, Randall?" I asked. I met his eyes—for a moment at least. I even managed words, and a voice, as mocking as his own. "Was I in your thoughts as well as Aunty and Gregory? And do you find me unchanged?"

"Had you expected I would think of you? As to your having changed or not, weren't you already something of a stranger when I left?"

My eyes dropped to the table. I picked up the lace fan, and opened and shut it, opened and shut it. I could not possibly have kept on looking.

Aunty dragged at his coat sleeve. "Sit down, Randall. All of us must sit down. Thank you, Gregory. And a

cushion, if you please—no, a little lower—just here. That's it." She focused confused, vague eyes on Randall. "Now then, what's this about a prodigal and a black sheep? Dear me. Dear me. And did some one say something about China? Speak up, if you please, Randall. Tell Aunty where you have been. And you shouldn't have stayed so long. . . ."

Randall might have been Randall in knee breeches again.

"You have just docked from Canton, have you?" Gregory broke in quickly, doing his best to make it all bearable. His question was courteous. Impersonal. Civilized.

"Yes. You should feel flattered. I got out of my pea-jacket the moment we berthed; I didn't want to waste five minutes coming ashore for this little family reunion. I consider it the greatest, greatest luck, finding you in." His cool smile curled again. "It seemed a better risk, simply appearing, instead of sending a note around first."

"Yes. I see your point. We might easily have been—not at home." Gregory's response was as cool as Randall's smile. I thanked heaven that Lew padded in on his felt-soled slippers to set down a tray of glasses and a decanter. At Randall's quick "Lew! Now, don't tell me you don't know me?" he spun around to stare, and then, delightedly, he shook the hand Randall held out. "Mr. Randall! You home again? Velly nice, velly nice to see you."

"I'm glad you didn't forget me while I was gone. Not that any of you would, I suppose." He flicked a glance at Gregory, and then he was speaking to Lew again. "Tell Sang I shall be out in the kitchen to see him in a few minutes."

Lew hurried off to the pantry, his yellow face all smiles, and Gregory unstoppered a brandy decanter. "What sort of a voyage did you have?"

"Decent enough. A run of fifty-eight days."

"What's your cargo, the usual?"

"More or less. Silk. Tea. Hemp. Porcelain."

"Who is your ship's captain? Anyone I know?"

"You're looking at him." Randall bowed exaggeratedly, farcically, to Gregory. "Captain Randall Spencer, at your service. Impressive, eh? It isn't a handle I came by too easily."

"No—I expect not. You're to be congratulated."

"Thank you. What's more, my ship belongs to me. I'm captain-owner of her."

He was sitting back, completely at his ease, in one of Aunty's stiff-backed chairs, his long legs crossed. His hands, dark-skinned as his face, played with a paper cutter, picked up from the table I stood next to, just as mine were playing with the fan. His palms were callused, but the nails of his strong-looking supple fingers, as sensitive and long as Gregory's, were fastidiously cared for.

He was a sophisticated man of the world in his handsome, well-cut dark suit. And yet all the careless, rough, free manners of his boyhood suddenly dominated the drawing room again, as they had dominated it years before. Were Aunty and Gregory remembering him, too, and vainly steeling themselves against remembering him, as he used to clatter in from the wharves or the shore or Chinatown? Needing, always, a reminder from Aunty to lower his voice and not slam doors. Did they remember him shouting in the hall the moment he got through the front door for everyone to "Come and look. Look what I've got!"

Sometimes it was a handful of Chinese rice cookies with paper fortunes rolled in them, or a length of frayed, tarry line some good-natured dock roustabout had given him so he could try his hand at tying sailors' knots. Perhaps it was

only a broken-bladed knife triumphantly retrieved from a gutter. Perhaps a shell picked up at a beach, or one of the blue or green or amber glass floats, like great bubbles, that fishermen in the Orient tied to their nets, and that broke away and drifted ashore now and then at high tide. It might be a popping-eyed cod he had caught, or a striped bass. In that case his linen blouse, his flannel knickers and jacket, and his filthy brown hands would reek of fish and the cut-up sardines, or salmon eggs he used for bait. Tracked-in sand would follow him in a gritty trail up the crimson-carpeted hall stairs. The banister would need wiping.

The "everyone" he shouted for was only I, actually. It was I who never failed to rush out of the nursery to exclaim over his prize, whatever it was, and to demand an account of his adventures before Aunty or a maid ordered him off for a bath. More often than not, after one of his excursions, he would be punished for coming home too late or for having gone off without express permission. Exiling him to his room with bread and milk for supper was a frequent discipline.

I could not eat my own dinner on those evenings when he had been punished. Aunty was horrid! Aunty was unfair! I would sit, silent, but inwardly fuming and rebellious while I thought about the bread and milk. The roast beef the rest of us were served, or Sang's good pudding, or flaky pastries, would not go down. If Randall was to starve, I wanted to starve too.

I wondered now, gripping the fan sticks, how much of all that had been obvious to Aunty or Gregory. How conscious of it had they been?

Gregory was asking another polite, conventional question. "Where are you docked?"

"At the Battery and Front wharves. Pier ten. Come aboard sometime, why not? You, and Lilas, too, if she would like." The mockery in the agate eyes, the mockery of the curled-lipped smile was suddenly diabolic. "It will be an old story, of course. You won't find many changes."

"An old story?" Gregory raised a questioning eyebrow.

"You have been aboard my ship a hundred times, my dear fellow. She is the *Star of China*."

The *Star of China*. Four words dropped deliberately, provocatively, tauntingly. I heard my breath catch in a gasp. Cloudy-eyed Aunty peered uncertainly. "The *Star*? Dear me. Dear me. . . ." Gregory had frozen. I saw firelight glint through the half-tilted brandy bottle he held suspended. And then he was pouring out a brown stream into the glasses, and handing one to Randall, and raising the other in a little salute.

"You're full of surprises. But here's to the *Star*! As long as Spencer and Company decided to sell her, I'm glad she fell into good hands." He tilted the brandy bottle over his glass again. "Where did you pick her up?"

"She'd been a coastwise tramp after you let her go. All she needed was overhauling to get back on a money-making run."

"You've done well?" Gregory's question could not have been more interested. I marveled at him. He had moved closer to Aunty's chair. His hand was on her shoulder. For the benefit of Lew or Norah or whatever servant might possibly be hovering in the hall, all ears, all interest concerning the return of a long-absent, seafaring Spencer, the four of us were what we had always been in the eyes of our Nob Hill world and what he was determined we should remain. A devoted family, in spite of one member's incurable wanderlust. A family without secrets.

"The Orient offered opportunities, did it?"

"Any number." Randall's smile was enigmatic as well as mocking. "Once you know where to look for them. And Kuan Yin helped. She's not the Goddess of Good Fortune for nothing." He flashed me an incredibly intimate, incredibly hurting smile. "You remember, Lilas, how certain I was she would be on my side if I approached her properly?"

I was a child again, on a beach, as he asked it. The two of us, Randall and I, crouched by a rock that, terribly, had become an altar. A thin spiral of gray odd-smelling smoke was blowing seaward, toward the East. Incense, joss-stick incense, bought on Dupont Street. I crunched the fan harder. "You have been gone a long time, Randall. We were children—you can't expect me to remember everything."

"No?" He shrugged, and got up from his chair. "I must do some remembering of my own. I brought back a present or two. They are in the hall."

As he left the room, Aunty's dropped, shaking head jerked up from her bodice yoke. "Presents?" she demanded excitedly. "Are we to have presents? What's for me? What's for me?" She could not contain herself. "Presents! Presents!"

Gregory took her hand. "Randall has brought you something very nice indeed, I am sure, Aunt Edith, but you must wait." He plumped up the pillow at her back. "Shall we try to guess what it's to be?" He quieted her, turned her excitement into a game, as only he could have had the patience and understanding, the never-failing kindness, to do until Randall came back into the drawing room.

He was carrying a black lacquer and gilt birdcage, shaped like a little pagoda, and two parcels wrapped in gold tea

paper. He held out the cage to Aunty. "See—a pair of finches, Aunt Edith. They'll sing from morning till night. When I saw them in the shop window, I thought, 'Just the ticket! They will keep Aunt Edith thinking of her Ran every minute of the day until the sun goes down, or until she covers them!' And here is something else." He tore the wrappings from the largest parcel. "Wind bells to make music for you when the birds go to sleep, just to be certain you can't forget me."

How could he? How could he? Poor pitiful vulnerable Aunty. The last thing in the world she could want would be to be reminded of him. The last thing the Aunty she used to be would want. But Aunty, growing senile, was someone else. She loved her presents. She chirped at the birds and swung the wind bells by their tasseled mandarin-red cord. "Wind bells?" she asked. "Wind bells . . . Aunty had some wind bells once before, didn't she? Pretty, painted wind bells, hanging up?"

For a third stabbing instant that evening I was suddenly a child again. A nighttime draft from a stealthily opened door stirred along a dark, silent bedroom ell—and then a faint jangle, a thin, betraying clash of glass strips.

"This is for you, Lilas. A wedding present. You'll forgive its being overdue? I heard of your marriage only shortly before I sailed. China is a long way off. . . ."

"Yes. Yes, I know." I didn't want his present, but he was holding it out. I had to take it. I couldn't not.

I fumbled with bright twine. The stiff gold paper rustled. Randall had brought me an ivory box. No, not just one box, I saw as I opened it. Boxes within boxes. Each lidded over. Each elaborately carved on the inside. Each smooth-surfaced. Each separate and yet part of an intricate whole.

"It's beautiful," I murmured tritely.

"Interesting, at any rate. I found I couldn't resist it. I'm sorry, Gregory, if you feel left out, but you make present-giving difficult. 'Gregory is a connoisseur,' I remembered, 'and he already has everything he wants.'" Randall emptied his brandy glass. "It's time I said my good nights. I mustn't tire you, Aunt Edith. And I'll be paying you visits often."

"You expect to be in port some time?" Gregory's question held nothing more than a polite interest. Carefully I kept my eyes on the ivory box in my hand.

"It remains to be seen. I have no definite plans—except to enjoy as many little family reunions as possible."

The clock on the stair landing struck, filling a little silence.

"You have a cab waiting, I suppose, Randall? I am afraid I can't offer to have Wrenn drive you." Gregory's voice was level. "I shouldn't care to be responsible—it's difficult to say just what his reaction might be. . . ."

"In the face of his understandable and entirely justified anger . . . ' shall I finish it for you, Gregory? You were always careful to avoid the unpleasant. And so old Wrenn is still about, is he?"

'He has been extremely loyal," Gregory acknowledged stiffly.

"Which means he hasn't talked, and that you are properly grateful?" With the insolence he wore like a cloak, Randall put an arm through Aunty's. "Tell me, Aunt Edith, can we arrange my next visit now, before I go? What do you say? Tomorrow? The next day?"

The question hung waiting. Aunty was not paying attention. She was puckering her lips, trying to coax the huddled sleepy finches to twitter. Gregory's hand tightened on his glass. "Aunt Edith isn't up to making plans ahead. But

'as far as Lilas and I are concerned"—he turned to me—"do you suppose you could fit Randall in at the table to-morrow night if he cared to join us?"

I could not believe he had asked it, but his dark eyes were urging, "Please, Lilas, carry this off, help me," and there was nothing to do but make the answer he wanted. "Yes, yes, of course. We are giving a dinner, Randall. There's to be a Subscription Ball afterward—we could get you a card."

"You are very kind. I accept with pleasure." He gave me another mocking bow, and then Aunty another kiss, and she patted his cheek. "Did you say you were Randall? And did I thank you, dear, for the lovely presents you brought Aunty?" She swung the wind bells on their cord again. "Hear? And I have birds, too—tweet, tweet—pretty birdies, prettie birdies, aren't you going to sing?"

Randall looked from Gregory to me. "It's always like this, now?"

"The greater part of the time. You can see why Lilas and I don't encourage callers," Gregory answered.

"Callers, yes. But I happen to be family. And Aunt Edith and I would have all sorts of things to talk about if she had a good day. It was something I looked forward to tremendously; our going over old times."

"Indeed?" Gregory lifted an eyebrow. "I'm sorry for the disappointment. But if there should ever be a predictable moment or two ahead—and if we can get in touch with you——"

"You are more than kind. But now, if I may, I shall go out and find Sang."

Randall, back in Aunty's house. Randall knowing every room. Randall belonging to the house. Still a part of it as he had once been a part of me.

As he sauntered off to the kitchen, Gregory, with nothing to say but his mouth curving contemptuously, pulled a bell cord for Nellie, the upstairs maid, to come and help Aunty to bed. She had been part of Aunty's household as long as I could remember. When Randall appeared again, she shook hands with him delightedly, and it was all Master Randall this, and Master Randall that, as though he had never gone away. Been sent away. There was a difference.

Not that Nellie knew. She showed him to the door eventually, after what seemed hours.

Gregory had gotten Aunty to her feet, and with Nellie and her cane, she started up the stairs. She had insisted upon carrying the birdcage. Nellie carried the wind bells. Nellie would undress Aunty and settle her in bed like a great baby. It might be days before she made the effort to leave it again. We never knew what her whim or her strength would be.

"Shall we go up too?" Gregory asked briefly, seeming to have no more wish to talk than I.

"Yes. My head aches."

We turned out the gas jets of the wall brackets and the center chandeliers with their dangling, glinting prisms. We turned out the bronze Winged Mercury lamp on the newel of the stairs. I was glad when we reached the top. Now at last we could shut the door of our bedroom.

It had been a guest room, at the back of the house, before Gregory and I took possession of it after our marriage. The carpet was garlanded in green leaves and red roses. The two tufted satin chairs drawn up to a coal grate matched the velvet of the heavy festooned window draperies and bed hangings. On the black marble mantel a pair of alabaster vases, shaped like clasped hands, held wax roses. So much crimson—so much dark crimson, it struck me. . . .

' A room of fulfillment and passionate joys. A room of luxurious comfort. A room with an elegance. And yet it might be pleasant to do it over. An extravagance, admittedly, merely to satisfy a momentary mood, a sudden inexplicable distaste.

I wished my head were not aching. I wished the front-door bell had not rung. I put the Chinese box on my dressing table, and while Gregory was taking out his studs and cuff links and opening a chiffonier drawer, I looked into the mirror for a quick, private appraisal of my face. "Why do I look no different than I looked before dinner?" I questioned myself, surprised. "I ought, rightfully. Because I am different." I stared into the eyes meeting mine. "I am Lilas Spencer, yes, but a Lilas whose existence ceased, or so I thought, years ago. Now, though, now, for this past hour . . ."

I did not finish the sentence. What had I been about to acknowledge to the woman in the glass? I had no idea. It was with relief that I looked hastily away from her, hearing Gregory ask me if I was ready to be unhooked.

He watched me step out of my dress and my ribbon-run petticoats and camisole. He unclasped my bracelets, kissing each wrist where the blue veins branched. When I was in my nightgown, I took the tortoise-shell pins from my hair and let it fall over my shoulders, and he brushed it, as he brushed it every night. Then he pushed it aside to kiss my throat and neck. "Come to bed, Lilas."

"In a moment, Gregory." I drew away from him and went to the window on the pretext of looping aside the curtains, opening the shutters, for the night. I could see the docks, far down below the hill, where cobbled streets ran into the bay. I told myself I could distinguish the lights of the *Star of China* from all the other twinkling

red and green and yellow lights that shone out, rocking gently with the even dip and swell of the tide and reflecting themselves in black water.

"She is there, is she, the *Star*? You fancy you can see her?"

I whirled, startled, caught out. Gregory was lying in bed, his arms crossed under his head, watching me. "Your *Star*. She was always yours, wasn't she, Lilas? Yours and Randall's, no one else's, when we were children." It was a statement, rather than a question.

"In a way, but you could have shared her if you'd chosen."

"Could I?"

"Why not? The three of us had the same right to board her whenever we chose. But she never meant anything to you."

"Didn't she?"

"You know she didn't, Greg. I was always sorry. It was only the office of Spencer and Company you cared about. I remember how everyone used to say, 'What a clever boy, already beginning to take an interest in the family business. How lucky for Miss Edith.' And you seemed so . . . so much like a grownup. It was never the sea with you. The sea, or ships with their sails set, or faraway places. Ships were only to make money, you always said. Or to bring back those first little bits of jade and quartz you started to collect."

"That's true enough. We merely had a different slant, you and I."

My hand was on a shutter, hooking it back; those twinkling lights down there—and the water was a mirror too, as well as glass—if you looked long enough—if you dared look. . . .

"Don't forget my Kuan Yin, either—speaking of collections. I could have choked the breath out of Randall tonight. God, when I think of his filthy hands on it and his gall, reminding me. He tried to steal it once, remember? I caught him going out my bedroom door."

"So you told me. I still think he might only have been—been looking."

"Nonsense. Not our precious cousin. He meant to pawn it—sell it—he was always out of pocket money."

"And he has been dishonest in China, is that what you are thinking?" I asked it as I stared down at the docks where the same wind that swayed the boughs of tall eucalyptus trees at the foot of Aunty's garden hummed in the stripped rigging of a three-master just in from the East.

"Any number of lucrative enterprises may have paid off. The opium trade for one. Pearling. Smuggling. There's always a market for singsong girls. And some of the Mandarin-class women have money of their own. A Cau-casion might be exciting to them. Randall isn't without charm of a sort."

My cheeks flamed. I was glad of the dark. "And yet you asked him to dinner, Greg? You asked him to Aunty's house as our guest, knowing what we know about him, beside what you are guessing?"

"What else could I do? The whole town will hear he's back, and we took a stand eight years ago, Lilas, you and I and Aunt Edith. There can't be any backing down. Not now. Not ever."

"He is to be who we made him? The adventurous, restless Spencer cousin who chose to go off to sea, chose to make a life of his own?"

"Exactly. And the attractive, successful man he has be-

come, whom we are welcoming home with appropriate family affection."

"But Wrenn? What will Wrenn do?" I whispered. The carriage house with coachman's quarters above it was at the foot of the garden too. One of the windows was dimly lighted, the others were blank and staring, as they had been for years. And Wrenn's stepdaughter was dead because of Randall. Wrenn's Rosie.

"Wrenn?" Gregory gave a short harsh laugh. "I don't doubt for a minute he has heard the story of the goose and the golden egg. You think he'd make a move? No. He's not a fool, Lilas, though I couldn't resist reminding Master Randall what a ready man with a whip he used to be."

I turned from the window, suddenly shivering, and groped my way into bed.

"Hold me," I begged Gregory. "I am cold. It's—it's the wind." He put his arms around me, and we lay silent until Gregory spoke out of the darkness. "His being here, his coming tonight, is nothing in itself. It's what brought him back that matters. What does he want? What is he after?"

I had no answer to offer; Gregory could find none of his own. I was thankful when he gave up trying. I was thankful when his arms held me even closer. I was grateful for his ardent murmurings, his importunings of a lover. As much as he, I wanted to forget the man who had invaded Aunty's drawing room with a cage of birds from Canton, faintly jangling wind bells, and an ivory box that was many boxes.

After a while my shivering stopped. Gregory fell asleep. But for me, the soughing in the trees was too loud.

The tied-back curtains strained and billowed at the win-

dows like canvas in a wind from the sea that smelled of salt and kelp and whose breath damply blurred the shadowy pier glass in a corner and the mirror on my dressing table. Nightly fog had crept in through the Gate. I could hear the mournful tolling, tolling, of the signals at Lime Point and Angel Island.

The clock on the landing struck. Did I, after all, want to fall asleep, like Gregory, and forget a cousin long absent, and now come home again? Seemingly not. For I caught myself counting—midnight, in Aunty's house and eight bells aboard the *Star of China*. Eight bells in the captain's cabin.

2

OUR NOB HILL HOUSE took on a party air the next day when a green-and-white striped awning was stretched from the curb to the front door and lined with an aisle of potted palms. Wrenn, in his bottle-green double-breasted great-coat, with a smart cockade in his glistening top hat, waiting to open carriage doors, would be a final formally festive touch.

When the maids had set the dining-room table for eighteen, with all the leaves in, and the Imari service plates laid on yards of monogrammed glossy damask, I myself arranged an epergne of maroon carnations and trails of smilax. The centerpiece would not come right. I struggled with it for an hour. I cut stems too short, only to wish I hadn't, or frowned, provoked, at stems too tall, thrusting up too stiffly. Everything had to be perfect that evening when Randall would have his first glimpse of me

as hostess in this house of Aunty's where he too had once belonged.

I had no concern as to the food. I could depend completely on old Sang and Lew. Dinner would be perfect, from bay shrimp to strawberry meringue. Gregory himself had gone down to the cellar and selected the dry sherry for the shrimp and the clear soup and the sweetbread entree; the Moselle and the Burgundy for the guinea fowl and the roast beef, the Veuve Cliquot for the dessert, the liqueurs and the sazerac brandy.

Why did I care so much as I snipped the stems of the carnations and arranged and rearranged them? Spencer pride? The armor the three of us, Aunty, Gregory, and I, had worn so long. No one, no one in the world, guessed I had been torn in two when Randall was sent away. And never, not for a single moment, would I let Randall himself think, "She tried to make herself over. She tried to fit Gregory's pattern. But the cut and the cloth are wrong and she knows it."

It was the last thing I wanted. And so the epergne of flowers mattered enormously. Randall would see. Randall would know, because I would prove to him that the pattern had been wisely chosen after all.

Stupid feminine reasoning? Perhaps. But I struggled with the carnations until they suited me. Now the table was perfect. Now it was exactly right. And Aunty herself could not have arranged a dinner party more elegant than Gregory's and mine would be.

Later, when Gregory came home from the office, and we had taken our baths, and Gregory had shaved, and I had fluffed violet talcum on my neck and arms with a big swan's-down puff and brushed and coiled my hair in its chignon, Gregory hooked me into a new dress. He would

not let me ring for Nellie to maid me. He liked me to himself in our bedroom, he always said.

The dress was a yellow gros de Londres, draped at the low bodice into two huge puffs below my bare shoulders, and swathed narrowly at the hips, to fall into a yard-long ruched and ruffled train. An expensive dress. "Never mind, we can afford it." Gregory had dismissed the price when he went over the monthly bills with me. "I want my wife to wear handsome clothes. The best. We should have your portrait done."

That was Gregory. The best, the finest, meant everything to him. That, and his pride. They meant a great deal to me, too. The latter in particular. I had been made to learn its importance. And one can learn anything if one must.

Just before I turned from the mirror to go downstairs, Gregory fastened the clasp of my topaz necklace. I took a moment to settle a pair of matching drops in my ears. Idly Gregory picked up trinket after trinket from the open velvet-lined jewel box on my dressing table and held them to the flaring, hissing gas jets that lighted the mirror. He approved the string of pearls, swinging from his hand, that had been my mother's, but he raised an eyebrow critically at a brooch I had bought for myself of black enamel and brilliants. "Why not real diamonds, Lilas?"

"They cost a great deal of money, Gregory."

"Of course they do. But you have a great deal, and you will have more." He leaned down and kissed my throat. "A pendant, hung right here, where that pulse of yours beats. Or even a necklace." He put his two hands around my throat. "You see how small an investment; just the slimmest of strands?" His hands were a close, teasing caress. "Sweet, frugal Lilas. I wish I were the one, not you,

who will own all those Spencer and Company shares some day." He laughed, meeting my eyes in the mirror. "Do you suppose people thought I was after an heiress, marrying you?"

I laughed back at him and made a *moue*. "Am I ugly enough for them to think so?" I stood up and revolved slowly in front of the pier glass, like a mannequin. "Compliment my dress at any rate, won't you?"

"It's perfection—because of who is wearing it. You are very beautiful, Lilas darling. A man couldn't have a more beautiful wife." Gregory took both my hands, turning up their palms and kissing them. "Turn round again. Let me look at you."

How proud he was of me! His glance made me happy, gave me a delicious melting, glowing sense of desirability, even while it occurred to me, as it had before, that I was a little like a possession. Something in a cabinet, to be cherished and, on occasion, to be exhibited. But he had always been a collector. I understood him too well, I was too fond of him to mind. He was simply—Gregory.

We went down to the drawing room with my train a spreading rustle, a heavy drag of silk on the stairs, and took our place by banked conservatory ferns, opposite the mantel with its gold-framed mirror. A world of mirrors, Aunty's house, when you thought of it. Mirrors everywhere, on every wall. But what did we see, Aunty and Gregory and I, looking back at each of us from so many reflecting depths? Nothing more, in my own case certainly, than what I wanted to see, I told myself confidently. There I was now, tall slim young Mrs. Spencer in her extravagant yellow dress, her topaz earrings glinting, swinging. Her head was high. She was poised and radiant, standing next

to her distinguished-looking, charming husband, a smile ready for the guests beginning to arrive.

Randall was the last. I had begun to wonder, and I found it something of an effort to keep my eyes from straying to the door. When he finally came up to us, he gave Gregory and me another one of his exaggerated mock bows, but he did not put out his hand, nor did Gregory and I put out ours. We introduced him to our friends. Several of them had known him as a child. It all went easily. In minutes he had been accepted. But Aunty's drawing room had never seen this Randall. There was nothing of a careless-mannered difficult boy about him, nothing of a seafarer, except for his swarthiness, that one could imagine had been accentuated by sun and salt winds. The cut of his evening clothes had an easy correctness. His pearl studs were handsome. Oh, yes, he had done well for himself.

We went in to dinner. I had seated Randall halfway down the table, as far as possible from either Gregory or me. It was again difficult to keep my glance from wandering. I heard him talking, laughing, making himself wittily agreeable.

Someone asked him how long he was staying in port. "As I told my cousins, I have no plans," I heard him answer. Before I could look away, he was mocking me with a smile. "My main concern is to enjoy their company. I've been away too long. I intend to get all I can out of this visit, and possibly make up for what I missed by leaving."

It could have meant anything. It could have meant nothing. I quickly began to talk to my dinner partner.

Dessert came on eventually, and then when we had dipped into finger bowls, I caught Gregory's eye and stood up. The women rustled after me into the drawing room.

The men lingered with Gregory over cigars and brandy until time to leave for the ball. I excused myself while cloaks and capes were put on, gloves and muffs, scarves and fans collected, and went up to Aunty's room to say good night. "Has Nellie settled you comfortably?" I asked as I kissed her. "You have your chocolates?" A box always had to be close.

She was drowsy and content, propped on her pillows. "Was your dinner party a success, child? Everything went well? Good. Gregory chose an excellent Moselle. He saw to it that I had a glass sent up on my tray."

The little worn black Bible, with its dangling purple ribbon markers, from which she read the last thing each evening, had slipped from her hand. I picked it up and put it next to the silver bell and the wax night light. She refused to have Nellie sleep in the adjoining dressing room. "It fidgets me," she insisted crossly, and so we let her have her way. But she was not alone, after all. Not when you thought about it. Not with that pair of finches, huddled in the lacquer cage, their heads under their wings. To be sure, they were silent, but they were there, for company, and so was a tinkle of painted glass, chiming in a draft from one of the tall windows, opened a crack at the top for a breath of night air.

"Do you hear?" Aunty was listening, her head on one side, and looking pleased. "Randall says he doesn't want his Aunt Edith to forget him, and I shan't, not with my pretty bells and my birds. He has been away on a very long voyage, Lilas. He went to China, but now he is back."

"Yes. Yes, I know, Aunty."

She was herself again for a moment before she drifted off to sleep. "Be sure Gregory has his door key, Lilas. I have never approved of keeping the maids up when one is

coming in at all hours. And have a good time, dear. You look very lovely."

"Thank you, Aunty." I went downstairs, wondering what the house would be like without her. I could not imagine it. And yet Aunty might die tomorrow, for all we knew, or the next day. Greedy, babyish Aunty, who ate too much. Who panted and groaned, climbing stairs when she took it into her head to get up, and who had to pay for it afterward by lying like a stone in bed. Aunty, who wasn't always "right" any more, but whom I loved, and whose vagaries I found only pitiful. "She has me, and she has Gregory," I thought thankfully. "She has two of us, at least. And each of us has always tried our best to make up to her for a third. . . ."

Randall was standing by the newel, the last of our guests to leave. He had flung a swinging, debonair Inverness cape over his shoulders. A glint of satin lining showed under its broadcloth. He was fastening the clasps of immaculate white kid gloves. "You said good night to Aunt Edith for me too, and gave her my love, I hope?"

I concerned myself with the drawing-on and buttoning of my own gloves, which reached high on my arms to the shoulder poufs of gros de Londres. It was a way of avoiding his derisive eyes. "I'm sorry, Aunty was asleep." It was all I could think of to murmur with Norah and Lew at the door, waiting to see us out.

"I shall have to learn her schedule, I see." Randall picked up his top hat from the hall table. "Before I go, Gregory, may I compliment you on how radiant your wife looks? She is happiness personified. And that's a very charming dress, Cousin Lilas, though I somehow thought you might be wearing green."

"Green?"

"Weren't you especially fond of it—once? 'The green
that's the color of waves, underneath, before they break.'"

He was impossible. "Will you give me my cloak, Gregory dearest?" My voice had a hint of unsteadiness, but as I stood there, with Gregory fastening soft, close fur at my neck, I looked up at Randall. "I lost my fondness for green years ago. I dislike it as intensely as I have grown to dislike the sea. Both remind me of—"

"Of what, Lilas?"

I wet my lips. "Of a coward and a liar."

Lew and Norah could not have heard me nor even sensed any undercurrents. As I spoke, I smiled, and was a cousin exchanging pleasantries with a cousin, but I felt Gregory's hand brush mine warningly. As for Randall, he might almost have been deaf. Those agate-cold eyes only looked at me long enough for mine to waver, and then, imperturbably, he was thanking us for dinner and for his card to the ball. "I mayn't run across you later. There'll be something of a crowd, I expect."

So he had no intention of dancing with me at the hotel? I should have been glad. "You are glad," I told myself. When he had gone, Gregory gave me his arm, Lew opened the door for us, and we went down the front steps, under the striped awning, to the street, where a cab, drawn up ahead of Aunty's carriage, had just pulled away from the curb.

Wrenn would have seen him leave. Wrenn would have seen him earlier, arriving. A first glimpse of each other in all those years. And at night. It had been nighttime for them both once before—dreadful nighttime. But Wrenn's suety face was expressionless. He touched his hat to me and to Gregory with the correctness, the servility, he had reserved for Aunty when we were children. Gregory gave

an order and closed the carriage door after us, and then we were driving off down a cobbled hill, slick and glistening with damp, and lighted by the dim, diffused glow of fog-bleared street lamps.

Gregory drew me close to him. "You shouldn't have said it. Don't waste your breath on him. But you made me glad, all the same. I used to think, 'It will always be the sea for Lilas; nothing but the sea.' " He took my gloved hand and laid it against his cheek. "I still can't believe I've got what I so much wanted."

We reached the hotel, and Wrenn drove through the wide gates of the court, where brass braziers burned, and around the circular drive cut in the flagged marble flooring. Each of the court's tiered galleries was a ring of light, its dome a floating, luminous glass sphere. We got out of the carriage and left our wraps, and were in a bright, crowded gold-and-white ballroom. Gregory and I danced and danced—lancers, galops, quadrilles—and drank champagne, and exchanged partners, and then danced together again. Round and round. Round and round. The violins lifted me off my feet. Everything was spinning glitter. Randall went by once, waltzing with a girl in white. A pretty girl. She was eighteen or so, I guessed, with rosebuds and blue ribbons looping her tulle flounces.

At three o'clock the blazing chandeliers had begun to pale. The orchestra packed up its instruments. Broughams and coupés and landaus rolled into the court again, where the charcoal in the braziers had burned low. A carriage starter shouted names. It was our turn. "Spencer! Spencer!" Wrenn reined in Aunty's chestnuts and then flicked his whip, and the horses were stepping along, over New Montgomery to Sacramento Street, out Sacramento to Taylor.

In the warm dark intimacy of the carriage with its

drawn shades and velour lap rug, Gregory put his arms around me. His knowing hands found the swells of my breasts where yellow silk was cut low. I sagged against him passively. I let him kiss me, and kiss me.

When we reached home and were in the quiet front hall and climbing the stairs, Gregory was half carrying me. My velvet cloak slipped from my shoulder to drag even more heavily than my train. Its fur-edged hem caught at the turn of the landing with a hard jerk that pulled me against the banister. I looked down, clutching at Gregory. The landing hung like a shelf over the hall, so far below. Hung like a cliff. But instead of a polished floor there had been rocks under that other cliff where Rosie had slipped—plummeted. Down—down. I hid my eyes in Gregory's shoulder. "Don't let me fall. Don't let me Gregory. Don't let me!"

"I've no intention of it, sweet." Gregory laughed. "You've had too much champagne." He kissed me again, and I laughed too, shakily, still clinging to him, still not wanting to look.

Gregory freed my dragging cloak and carried me the rest of the way upstairs, and along the upper hall quietly, so as not to disturb Aunty. Our bedroom was cold, with nothing but ashes left in the grate, and stark with early gray light. I yawned and kicked off my satin slippers and pulled the pins from my hair. Gregory unhooked my dress.

I forbade myself to go near the window. I got into bed as quickly as I could so it would have to be Gregory who tied back the curtains and opened the shutters.

I had not looked out at the bay, I had not even glanced toward the window. "It is no fault of my own I can't go to sleep," I defended myself as I lay taut, rigid, with Gregory's head heavy on my shoulder, his breathing quiet, regular.

Gregory would say again, "Too much champagne." But Gregory didn't understand. It wasn't the pale golden bursting bubbles in a glass that kept me awake. The blame lay with that southing, southing, in eucalyptus trees. That southing in the *Star's* stripped rigging.

⊗⊗ 3

THE Star of China. We had the run of her decks when we were children. Because Spencer and Company owned her, both captain and crew made much of us when she was in port. She was the symbol of all our childhood joys, just as she was the symbol of the faraway East that tugged at my imagination and that I longed poignantly to see, determined fiercely to see. The East whose geographical position confused me utterly when I was little because Randall had once pointed seaward and said, "It's over there." But "over there" was out beyond the Gate, into the setting sun. And surely everyone knew the great orange ball slipping down into the water, where the sky touched, went to bed in the west. Randall laughed at me. It was Gregorv who explained a capital *E* was what made all the difference. I should have been grateful, but I did not bother to thank him. I ran off to tag after Randall and

pour out my new glib knowledge so he would no longer think me a stupid baby, a know-nothing.

To both Randall and me the *Star* was a promise as well as a symbol. Someday a glorious freeing wind would blow just for us, a giant wind that would fill the *Star's* sails and carry us out to sea on a swift-running tide. And we would be aboard because the gale had torn away the shutters, whipped aside the smothering lace curtains, the velvet draperies of the house on Nob Hill. It was a house we both found oppressive; Randall grew up hating it, as toward the end he seemed to hate Aunty. But we could trust to the wind. We could wait. Some day it would batter down the doors of all the rooms that shut us in with their closed-away-from-light feeling. No more long dark halls. No more clocks, always telling Aunty's time, not ours. And best of all, no more Wrenn.

Wrenn was Aunty's suet-faced thick-necked English coachman. I was terrified of him. So was Randall, I suspected, and even Gregory, though neither would admit it. He had a way of looking at a child out of his bright hard blue eyes. A way of reaching for his whip and flicking it, swishing it, whenever we went to the stables to visit the horses. Despite the servile "Miss Lilas, Master Gregory, Master Randall," he was surly and rough-spoken, though not, of course, in Aunty's hearing.

"He knows what side his bread is buttered on, all right, all right," Randall used to snort disgustedly. "He gives me a belly-ache."

Aunty would have punished him. You didn't say *belly*.

She had a penchant for anything English and a particular admiration for titles, and she was pleased with the two letters of reference Wrenn presented when she interviewed him.

"How very nice! One from a London baronet, children, and one from a Sussex Honorable."

She soon found out we detested him, but as she considered him a good man with horses and eminently correct on the box of her carriage, she chose to ignore our opinion.

When he moved into his quarters over the carriage house, he spent a good deal of his free time tending its window-box garden of trailing lobelia and ugly red-and-purple fuschias. That also was pleasingly "English" to Aunty.

"He says if he'd had enough money to retire, he would have stayed home and bought a cottage and a piece of ground," she told us. "I can just see it. A dear little thatched roof and hollyhocks. Too sweet!"

He was a middle-aged widower. His stepdaughter, Rosalind, lived with him. She was Gregory's age, and when they came, she began serving a housemaid apprenticeship by scrubbing floors and laying fires and cleaning grates.

We didn't call her Rosalind. Aunty considered it a highly unsuitable name for a servant. She was Rosie to us. Quiet-spoken. Going about her work with thick yellow braids bundled under a prim cap, cheeks that had the bloom of ripe fruit to them, and smooth white arms that showed when the sleeves of her chambray morning uniforms were rolled high.

She meant nothing to me. She could go or stay. But as for Wrenn, the wind that was going to blow, the wind that was the *Star's* wind, humming through her rigging, billowing her sails, would blow Wrenn away forever.

The wind smelled of sandalwood. Aunty smelled of lavender. What the wind would do with her, I had no idea. I could never make up my mind what I wanted it to do. Always, upstairs or down, in the nursery or in the

drawing room, she was a loving Aunty, who doted on us. But she was an inflexible Aunty, too, with inflexible convictions, inflexible standards and conventions, inflexible rules.

I had accepted them without question before Randall taught me what rebellion could be; afterward, it was only when the *Star of China* lay at her dock between voyages that I felt escape from Aunty and Aunty's house was even remotely possible.

As Gregory remembered, with a hint of bitterness, a hint of jealousy I found oddly touching, the *Star* had been "mine," or, rather "ours," Randall's and mine, equally. Boarding her meant a glorious drive to the wharves. And then there was a rush to climb a cleated portside gangplank. The captain's cabin lay aft, mahogany-paneled and winking with polished brass. Brass was everywhere. Brass-bound portholes. Brass brackets for oil lamps. Brass handles and lock on a sea chest.

The cabin was especially ours whenever the *Star*'s good-natured captain went ashore. We were allowed to rummage in the sea chest at will, and when we lifted the lid, its exotic breath, the wind's breath, from the East, of sandalwood and camphor, was stronger, even, and more exciting, than the wharf smell of salt water and bilge and copra and spice blowing in through the open portholes. We came on ships' logs, and on maps, and on brass-buttoned white linen jackets. These, we knew, the captain donned in hot weather when he was rowed ashore in his small boat once Oriental ports were reached.

"Canton!" Randall would exclaim enviously, and I was a parrot, repeating it, "Canton!" Once, Randall tried on a jacket. I laughed because it was comically too big, but Randall put his shoulders back and stood straight. "Maybe

it doesn't fit now, but you wait and see, Lilas," he advised confidently. "I'll grow into one just like it. And I'll be going ashore at Canton too, and at Fuchow and Tientsin."

Gregory seldom joined us in the captain's cabin. He looked down on our worship of the *Star*, considering us silly, I was certain, although he never said it in so many words. I was perfectly aware that he and Randall seldom if ever saw eye to eye. Gregory was older, of course, and a certain amount of lofty contempt was to be expected. It was only natural. Young as I was, I realized it, and accepted it.

Randall and I—he in the lead, I running to keep up—broke a great many of the rules. Usually our wickedness was nothing more than a raid on the kitchen for cookies or bread and jelly after Sang and Lew had scrubbed the pine sink boards white, polished the huge black range and closed its damper, pared or sliced or chopped the vegetables for dinner, set rolls to rise, and padded down to their basement bedrooms for long afternoon naps. Or perhaps we tiptoed to the basement itself—strictly forbidden territory—for a peek through keyholes to see whether the Chinamen were really puffing on the opium pipes they were reputed to drowse over. And if we sniffed a faint sickly sweet smell, or pretended we did, we would turn and run, with solemn, sacred vows never to give Sang or Lew away to Aunty.

We had Teena to visit, too, when we went to the basement. She presided over the laundry tubs, and kept starch boiling and sadirons heating on another big black stove. Napkins. tablecloths, sheets, pillowcases, ruffled and flounced petticoats and nightdresses, and chemises and drawers, the boys' blouses—the tubs were never empty of

soapsuds and bluing. But Teena was jolly and liked to laugh, and she always had a joke for us, and cups of coffee she poured from a pot that sat on the stove all day. Aunty disapproved of coffee for children. We were never allowed a swallow upstairs, and she would have been horrified to know how many of those cups we emptied. To Randall, of course, her disapproval only made Teena's treat taste better.

Perhaps our plans involved climbing the stable roof to peek into a swallow's nest. Sometimes we slipped into the stable to hang by our knees from the rafters, playing "trapeze," with the hay below for a net, or squeezed into the box stalls, as strictly out of bounds as the basement, to pat the flanks of the horses.

Once Randall accidentally brushed against, and snapped off, a branch of Wrenn's fuschias as he swarmed up the stable drainpipe. I was below, watching admiringly, and waiting, but with no real eagerness to follow, when Wrenn rushed out of the carriage house, cursing, his whip in his hand. I turned and ran ignominiously. Randall dropped down and ran too, but not before the whip had lashed hard at his legs. He showed me the welts it had raised that night when we were getting ready for bed. Great red things—

"They're awful!" I gasped. "Ooh—do they hurt terribly? Go tell Aunty! Go tell her this minute."

Randall shrugged. "She'd say I had it coming. I can just hear her. '*The way of transgressors is hard*, as I have told you so often, dear boy. How many times has Aunty asked you to stay away from the stable, and not bother Wrenn?' " He made a disgusted face, mimicking Aunty.

"But Wrenn is horrible! He knows you didn't mean to break his flowers. Why is he always so mean?"

Randall considered a moment, wincing as he touched the welts. "You know what I think? He'd like to get even."

"Get even for what?"

"For having to touch his hat to Aunt Edith. For having to say 'Miss Lilas,' 'Master Randall,' 'Master Gregory.' He likes a coachman's pay, but he doesn't like what goes with it. And he doesn't like Rosie carrying coal buckets and you being waited on."

"But Lew and Sang and the maids aren't that way. They're nice. We're friends."

Wrenn's thinking struck me as extremely odd. And every now and then, after that, I would wonder, uncomfortably, what else a disgruntled, envious coachman could do to "get even" with the family whose carriage he drove.

The welts did not put an end to our plans. Each one carried out successfully was a shared triumph. To be caught and punished was a shared, mutually resented, humiliation. Little by little the bond between us strengthened and became unbreakable, or so I thought. It did not matter that Randall's daring, his flouting of rules, secretly frightened me, or that I wished I could resist him. He enthralled me, and that was the end of it.

In his revolt against restraint he was a kite, tugging to be free of taut strings. Pulling, pulling, like our own bright paper kites from Chinatown that we flew at the shore on spring days that were all raw, tearing wind, the pound of steely surf, the scream of gulls, flying inland, away from low scudding storm clouds.

The shore meant the cove—our cove, that was to leave so ugly, so ineradicable a scar on all of us. Randall had discovered it by merest chance on a bright blowy day when Aunty sent us off in the carriage for an airing after school.

Gregory and Randall were in gray flannels sent for from London. I was in Tartan wool, with a basque and a round white linen collar. My long legs were gartered into white stockings. Scarlet tassels bobbed from the scalloped tops of my high-buttoned black patent leather boots.

I remember Rosie at the front door, waving us off for what promised to be another of our usual dull afternoon drives.

Wrenn took a road toward the ocean that we had been over dozens of times before. The carriage bowled along briskly for half an hour or so, and then Wrenn abruptly drew up the team. When we poked our heads out to see why, he announced one of the horses had cast a shoe. Instantly Randall, with a quick glance toward the sea, determined to make the best of the situation. "Who wants to sit around a blacksmith shop all afternoon while Dandy gets shod?" he demanded. "Come on, Lilas! Come on, Greg. Let's get out! Let's go exploring—maybe there'll be a beach. Wrenn can come back for us later." He turned the door handle and jumped out into the road, pulling me after him with a yank at my skirt. Gregory followed almost as eagerly. Wrenn looked dubious, wondering, I suppose, what Aunt Edith would have to say if he left us, and then he gathered up his reins again. "You're to keep away from the water, mind you, though it 'ud be small loss if the lot of you drowned; I'll be around again to fetch you home before dark." He wheeled and drove off, with Dandy limping, and the boys and I darted away from the road and across a bleak expanse of sand dunes. The sea and a beach we could play on were not nearly as close as we had supposed. It was a disappointment to realize how far below us the waves were breaking. The dunes had led us to a high cliff that dropped away to nothing but jagged rocks,

or so it appeared at first glance. But Randall refused to be balked.

"Let's take a look," he proposed boldly. "Here goes!"

Half scrambling, half sliding, he started recklessly down the cliffside, with nothing to break a fall but the clumps of yellow lupine he snatched at, and matted pink sand verbena.

"Come on, Lilas!"

I didn't want to follow. The cliff was too high. I was dizzy, looking down on the jagged spray-drenched rocks so far below. But Ran had said, "Come on. . . ."

Gregory grabbed my arm and yanked me back from the cliff edge. "Don't be an idiot! Do you always have to do what he says? What does he think he's doing? Playing he's treasure hunting, like a baby? And you think he's so wonderful!"

"He doesn't play baby games!"

"There you go, sticking up for him. You better get some sense. He'll land you in trouble one of these days. You just wait and see. You could be killed, right now, falling down that cliff. And so could Ran. And even if he doesn't fall, he'll get what-for from Aunt Edith, climbing in his new shoes. He'll be sorry."

It was all true. Gregory was right. And though I wished, resentfully, that he didn't sound so superior and grown up, almost like Aunty giving a lecture, I was glad he had stopped me from following Randall.

I didn't like picturing the steep cliff and the rocks. I began to halloo as loudly as I could against the wind and the roar of breakers. "Ran, Ran. Come back." And then, "Randall. Ran-dall." But there was no answer except an echo: "Ran-dall!"

We waited endlessly, shivering in the wind, for either

Randall or Wrenn to appear. Gregory looked crosser every minute. Could he possibly be secretly envious of Randall's foolhardiness? Did he wish he too had gone exploring? I could not decide. It was never easy to know for certain what went on in Gregory's head.

Wrenn finally drove up just as the sun had begun to slope toward that confusing East that was not east at all, but west. When Gregory reported Randall's escapade, Wrenn handed him the carriage reins with a churlish, "Hold the horses. I'll give a shout."

How dependable, how considerate a boy Gregory seemed as he talked to the horses and quieted their fretting, arch-necked impatience to get out of the wind and back to their stalls and their evening oats.

Wrenn, on the cliff edge, had made a megaphone of his gauntleted hands. The rough surly bellow sounded above the wind and the waves, and instead of an echo, I heard Randall's faint answering shout. And then there he was, scrambling up the cliff, tremendously pleased with himself, a cocksure grin on his face. "You missed it, you two."

His black hair was blowing every which way. His new shoes were rock-rubbed and soaked with salt water. His flannels were wet and sandy and stained by the lupine and verbena he had slid and clawed through. Wrenn grabbed him by the collar with a hard jerk. "You little devil! If I had the say, you'd get your breeches whipped off, you would, Master Randall. Into the carriage with you, do you 'ear? And be thinking up your excuses to your aunt. They'll be needed, my fine young sir."

"Let go, you old goat!" Randall squirmed free and raced to the carriage. Before he got in, he put a thumb to his nose audaciously

Wrenn started after him with an oath, his little ugly eyes

glinting, his heavy face mottled a dull red. And then he checked himself. He snatched the reins from Gregory and climbed heavily to his seat on the box. Terrified, I saw his hand go to the whip socket. It was silly of me. The whip would be only for the horses. That was bad enough.

I knew how fast the pair would go. They always went fast when Wrenn was angry and Aunty wasn't along. I scrambled in beside Randall, and Gregory swung in next. Wrenn's whip came down with a hard lash on the horses' backs. The carriage lurched off in a sudden start.

Randall laughed. "I made him good and mad, all right," he boasted proudly, and then he gave me a sharp thrust in the ribs with an elbow. "Where were you?" he demanded. "Why didn't you follow when I climbed down? Next time I say, 'Come along,' you'd better mind." His gray eyes were half joking, half serious. "Don't you know I'm the captain and you're only the first mate, and you have to do whatever I tell you?"

"She doesn't!" Gregory shot back contemptuously. "That captain talk—you're always getting Lilas into trouble. Leave her alone."

"Do you want to try and make me?" Randall doubled his fists. His brows were a scowling black band.

Would Gregory punch back? I shrank against the carriage seat, between them, thinking unhappily how stern a punishment Aunty would mete out all around if there were bloodied noses.

And Gregory hadn't meant to start it. Gregory had tried all afternoon to look after me, and he had taken my side because he was older and knew the proper way to act.

Quickly I tugged at Randall's sleeve. "What was it like on the rocks? Tell us, Ran. Was it dreadfully steep, going down? What did you see at the bottom?"

His fists were still doubled. His scowl was as black.

"Tell us," I persisted. "Please, Ran. . . ." He could not resist. He could not hold it back. That was the show-off part. Or did he want to tell me so I would have a share in his adventure, as I always had a share? I wasn't sure.

"A person could make a trail," he began slowly. "It wouldn't be too hard. Anyone could get down, and there's a little sandy beach—very small—like a—like a half-moon." Words tumbled out then. Vivid. Enraptured. I could see his discovered cove. I stood on his little half-moon of secret tide-washed shore.

And so did Gregory, evidently. "Not a bad-sounding spot," he observed with interest that was only barely condescending. "If there were a way to get around Aunty—if she would let us come back, I wouldn't mind taking a look." His dark eyes were on me reflectively. "She likes you best, Lilas" he observed with startling candor. "Ran next, and then me. It had better be you, Lilas, if anyone is going to ask."

"Ran next?" It came as a surprise, put that way by Gregory, who was so much a favorite of everyone who knew him. And yet—yes, Aunty did love Randall in spite of his naughtiness. She loved him a very great deal. It hardly seemed fair when you stopped to think about it.

When Wrenn marched into the house and explained our lateness in getting home, and when Aunty saw the scuffed shoes and the stained flannels, she made Randall put out his palms to be slapped twelve stinging times with the silver ruler from her desk. She told him, as she always did, how much it hurt her. Worse, he could be certain, than it did him. "But it's my duty to punish you." She had made Gregory and me watch the chastising, and we heard her

condemn Randall to a week of the bread-and-milk locked-in-his-room suppers that were almost commonplace.

As usual, when he had been punished that way, I could not eat my own dinner. I kept wishing I had slid down the cliff after him, wishing I had yanked free of Gregory's restraining grab at my sleeve. And then I remembered something Gregory had said on the way home: ". . . if anyone is going to ask—"

Late that night when I should have been asleep, I got out of bed and slipped down the hall to Aunty's room and knocked on the door. "It's me," I announced in a small voice.

"*I*, child, *I*. But don't stand about catching cold, with no wrapper or slippers on. And what on earth do you want, Lilas, at this time of night? Did you have a bad dream? Are you ill?"

Aunty was in bed reading her nightly Bible chapter, her spectacles pinching the high bony bridge of her Spencer nose.

I hauled myself into her high bed, and I told an outrageous lie. "Randall had to climb down the cliff, Aunty. He—he lost his cap. The wind came along. . . . And when he got down on the shore, he found a little beach. A cove. With rocks and crabs and sea anemones. I've never seen a sea anemone. Randall says they look like pink and purple flowers."

"Oh, he does, does he?"

"He says they shut up tight, tight, if you touch them. And there were shells. All sorts of shells. And he says we could catch fish if you let us go back. Might we, Aunty, do you think? Might we please?"

"Go back?" She hadn't said No, and I was her favorite. I reached up my arms in a persuasive hug. "Please, Aunty."

I kissed her. "And, and Ran didn't mean to hurt his clothes. It wasn't his fault. Not with the wind and his cap."

It ended with Randall having dinner downstairs with us the next evening. The day after, our by-the-fortnight seamstress who sewed in the attic with her mouth full of pins, her hands glacial in spite of a nauseously reeking coal-oil stove, cut out a sturdy brown linen play dress for me and corduroy knickers and loose jackets for the boys. And Aunty, presenting each of us with a surf-fishing pole, said we could go to the cove any Saturday morning we chose. Wrenn would drive us out. Wrenn would bring us back. Sang would make up a picnic basket.

A new cap was provided for Randall, without comment on the one supposedly blown away, but as he never wore one except under duress, it hung in the coat closet. The lie bothered me. I was relieved he didn't know about it. I was not entirely proud of the hug I had given Aunty, either. But I would have reached my arms up again, all the same.

The first time we went back to the cliff and I peered over the side reluctantly, squeamishly, I was dizzy again and terrified. But rather than have Randall, or Gregory, for that matter, think me a coward, I gathered courage enough to crawl after them. Once I had made a start, the descent was a tremendous adventure, and the shore, safely reached, a delight. The little beach of sand and rock was entirely hidden and secret, deserted, except for ourselves. There were just us, racing to the water's edge to cast in our lines, with gulls and sandpipers and a cold fog-wet wind and gray waves rolling in from China.

That was what Randall always claimed—"rolling in from China." And it was to China he was going when he grew up, he declared, over and over.

If Gregory had condescended to listen, he would lift a superior eyebrow. "What can you buy in Canton that you can't buy on Dupont Street, just by walking a few blocks or taking a horsecar?"

"I didn't say I was going to buy things, did I?"

But Gregory would not bother to argue. To him, the few blocks of narrow, crowded, twisting streets below our hill, called "Little China," or Chinatown, was a bazaar. And already possessions were important to him. Things of his own and Chinatown began to obsess him, just as the lure of an imagined Cathay obsessed Randall. Abruptly the beach ceased to interest him even mildly, once the novelty of our excursions wore off; our company became a bore. I was not surprised. After all, Randall and I were only children still, and he was a youth, with his suits soon to be ordered from a tailor, and his dancing school and holiday parties to be in the evening, with punch served, instead of in the afternoon, like ours.

The girls he danced with would put their hair up before too long. I knew he did not approve of my own black tangle, flying loose in the wind when Randall and I climbed rocks or raced each other on the sand, our shouts and our laughter sending the gulls into the sky.

He took to sauntering through Chinatown by himself on those Saturdays we went to the cove. He began to hoard his allowance to buy an occasional nice bit out of some poked-away shop or other where bargains could be picked up. A quartz snuff bottle once. Another time, a tiger print that impressed us. A celadon-green rice bowl. Little by little all the things that were the nucleus of what we began to call "Gregory's collection." Aunty told us proudly that he was becoming quite a connoisseur. It sounded impor-

tant even though we did not understand precisely what it meant.

She was not nearly as pleased with Randall's reaction to Chinatown. In the beginning his visits were made, I strongly suspected, for the sheer purpose of copying what an older boy had done. He would not have admitted it for the world. But then suddenly it seemed to dawn upon him that Chinatown was a more than passable substitute for the East, which he knew could never materialize for him until he was a grown man.

He, too, began solitary independent saunterings. Aunty's mouth pursed, and she remarked, disapprovingly, he might as well be a coolie, when he came back stuffed with fried shrimps bought from sidewalk stands, or bamboo sprouts and water chestnuts, and dried shark fins and soy sauce washed down with the bitter tea of cheap restaurants. And she termed his allowance-spending a foolish waste of money when he rushed home to exhibit the "trashy" penny puzzles, or games, or tricks, the kites we so loved, that tore in a day. She considered the bright paper lanterns he hung in his room gaudy dust catchers. She did not even like the paper flowers that uncurled from tight nubbins to bloom magically when we floated them in saucers of water. Real flowers were a different matter; she was pleased when Randall came home one day with a bunch of narcissuses for her. Randall did not say much when she thanked him, but he watched with obvious satisfaction while she sniffed them enjoyably, and put them in water herself.

After that he acquired a little ingratiating habit of bringing flowers fairly often. Now and again they were presented at the end of a day when he had rushed home, breathless, raced up the stairs, splashed hurriedly in his

washbasin, struggled into a dark jacket and one of the stiff wide white collars he detested, and clattered down the stairs again, and into the drawing room seconds before the dinner gong sounded, seconds before one of Aunty's scoldings began and punishment was meted out. From behind his back would come, flourished, a cone of green paper. A five-cent bunch of acrid-smelling orange marigolds sometimes, or a scant cluster of more narcissuses—Chinese lilies—or two bright red carnations.

"Flowers? For me?" Aunty exclaimed, whatever they were, as though she were opening a florist box full of long-stemmed roses. "Look, dears! Look, Lilas. Look, Gregory. See what Randall brought Aunty."

He had thought of her. He had spent his pocket money wanting to please her. It wasn't just a way to get around her. The lateness and the flowers had nothing to do with each other. I believed it because I wanted to believe it and because the superior, knowing expression on Gregory's face, the hint of contempt, would put me fiercely on the defensive. "It is easy for Greg always to be on time," I thought resentfully. "It is easy for Greg to keep out of trouble. He was born that way—he is lucky."

I refused to admit to myself that he was quietly willing to make the effort to consider someone else besides himself; that he was considerate of Aunty in a thousand little ways that thoughtless, wild Randall would never be.

Randall's birthday present to Aunty, the first year he discovered Chinatown, was not as much of a success as his bouquets. Wind bells, the delicate strips of painted glass strung on their black silk tasseled cord and gently, prettily, clashing with the slightest stir of air, were "trashy" too, in her estimation, I could easily guess when she unwrapped them. But Aunty was Aunty, always kind; she would not

have deliberately hurt the feelings of any of us for words. Certainly not of misfit Randall, so vexing, so alien, but whom she could not keep from loving.

And she found "just the right place," as she put it tactfully, for her present, in a little room toward the back of the house, next to the boys' bedrooms, that was known as "the study." An ugly walnut rolltop desk took up space in it, and there was a student lamp with a cracked green porcelain shade and shelves crowded with back number periodicals. There they were hung, faintly jangling if the smallest draft blew along the ell from which Gregory's and Randall's bedrooms opened.

A draft always stirred, I was to learn, when the door to the back stairway was cautiously opened and Randall crept out on one of his surreptitious night prowlings, or crept up to bed, just as stealthily, on his return. My room, too, opened off the ell, and if I listened, if I strained to hear . . . But those sorties of Randall's were to come later.

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IT WAS THE SPRING Gregory was seventeen that he bought his choicest treasure, a tiny, exquisite blanc de chine figure of Kuan Yin, Goddess of Mercy and Good Fortune. He showed it to us with the single comment, "I have wanted her a long time, so here she is." To want was to get, we knew, with Gregory. He ran his fingers over the procelain lovingly. It was as though his sense of touch were rewarded, almost more than his sense of sight, by his careful, purposeful hoarding, his eventual spending.

The Saturday after his purchase Randall and I went to the cove. It was a lovely morning. Quiet. Without the faintest stir of sea wind. For some reason the stillness seemed to please Randall. "It's the sort of day I was hoping for," he remarked mysteriously as we started out, but he would not tell me why. "You'll see," was all I could get from him; and then, even more mysteriously, with a little smile, and almost to himself, "It will work. I know it will work." I saw he had two fingers crossed.

"Is it something you want? Shall I cross my fingers, too?" I asked.

"It wouldn't hurt." His gray eyes had an odd eager look. He gave the impression of sitting forward on the very edge of the carriage seat.

Wrenn left us at the clifftop with our rods and a picnic basket and the creel Randall was carrying. We scrambled down to the rocks and pulled off our shoes and stockings, and I pinned my brown linen skirt high, in a bunch behind, with a safety pin provided by Aunty; when I was ready to bait my line, I reached for the creel, but Randall pushed my hand away. "Wait. I'll open it." He had a queer look on his face.

The lid went back, and I could not believe what I saw. Gregory's Kuan Yin. Gregory's delicate, costly goddess, and Randall was picking her up, unwrapping her from a careful padding of wadded-up towels.

Randall lifted her out, held her up, carefully, preciously. He stared at her. He was drinking her in.

"Oh, Ran! You shouldn't have! She's Gregory's. You had no right. You'll get in awful trouble. And if she broke. Put her back. Wrap her up again." I was aghast.

"Don't worry. I won't let anything happen to her. Not on your life. And I know she's Gregory's—worse luck. I'll have her back on his bureau before he comes in this afternoon, and he'll never know she's been gone. I've only borrowed her."

"But what for?"

"To—to ask her something." Randall's voice was suddenly a whisper. Intense. Intimate. "You know something? She gives people their wishes if she likes them and if they get on her good side."

"How do you do it?" For some reason, I too was whispering.

"First, I have to make an altar——"

"An altar? But that's wicked." My whisper was shocked, vehement. "Altars are for God. And Kuan Yin is only porcelain."

"That's what you think. But she's more. Lots more. I found out in Chinatown."

My own eyes were fastened on Kuan Yin. I could not take them off her.

"What are you going to ask her? What sort of a wish?"

The ground swell pounding against the rocks of our secret lonely cove was louder, I hoped, than my guilty, eager question. I wanted to look away from Kuan Yin, but I couldn't. Those calm, knowing eyes. That quiet, wise smile. Benevolent. Benign.

"I'll ask her to let me go to sea, to send me to Canton, and to please be quick about it. Because if she sends me at all, she can send me fast just as well as not."

He laid the little figurine back in the basket and looked around, considering. "What I need now is just the right rock. A flat one."

When he had chosen one to his liking, he brushed it clean of sand, wiped spray from it with a handkerchief from a trouser pocket. Then he lifted Kuan Yin from the basket again and stood her on the rock, making a little niche for her, with a handful of shore pebbles at her feet so she would not topple. "Now I need seaweed and some shells." It was an order. Whether I wanted to or not, I had to obey, as I must always obey. I ran to the narrow band of shoreline below the rocks and picked up a rope of seaweed, and then I dropped it again. It would not do. Randall would demand something better. You

had to give Kuan Yin the best. I waded out halfway to my knees, into an icy dangerous swirl of surf, forbidden surf that Aunty trusted us never to go near, and snatched at a brownish-green tangle of kelp, and dragged it ashore. The fronds I chose from it were like lace. Dripping, glistening wet lace. And then I hunted for shells. They, too, must be beautiful. I found three. Pearly. Scalloped.

Randall nodded approval. "Put them here. Make them look nice."

I made them look as nice as I could—handmaiden to a high priest. When I had spread the seaweed lace at Kuan Yin's white feet and arranged the shells, I was seized with a sudden impulse of my own. I darted to the cliff and snatched a handful of the yellow lupine that grew in sparse wind-dwarfed tufts. Flowers as well as shells and seaweed.

Randall rummaged in the creel. He took out a box of matches and two long, slender punk sticks. He lighted them, and handed me one. "Wave this around, the way I do mine, while I say to Kuan Yin what I'm going to say. I've thought about it a lot, and I think I've got it the way she'd like. We have to kneel, though."

And so I knelt, and waved the punk, and listened.

"Kuan Yin, make my wish come true. And let the smoke of these joss sticks blow East, so I'll know."

I shut my eyes tightly. I was afraid to look. Suddenly I was cold, colder even than when I had waded into the surf. And the coldness was from a wind at my back. A land breeze, springing up all at once. I screwed my eyes tighter.

But Randall snatched at my arm. "Look! Look!"

I had to look. And there was the thin gray smoke of our punk sticks, with its heavy, disturbing smell, drifting seaward. Incense. Incense blown to meet waves as gray, rolling in from China.

Randall sprang to his feet. His thin dark face was illuminated, jubilant. He gave an exultant shout. "I'll be going. Nothing can stop me if Kuan Yin says so." He snatched at my arm again. "Did you see, Lilas? Did you see how it blew, straight out? And you'll be going, too, because it was your smoke blowing East, just as much as mine. And you were kneeling, just like me."

Such a faraway place, China, when the wild hope of escaping from the house on Nob Hill faced me as an actuality. What had I let myself in for? But of course, if Randall were leaving, nothing could be as frightening, as dreadful, as being left behind. "When will we leave?" I quavered. "Will Kuan Yin let us know in time to pack?"

Randall ignored my absurd little-girl question. With greatest care, and with what I sensed could only be called reverence, he lifted Kuan Yin from her adorned altar, wrapped her once more in a padding of towel, and laid her in the creel. Then he buried the ends of the punk sticks in the sand. "Throw the shells back on the shore," he ordered. "Throw the seaweed into the waves again."

"What shall I do with the lupine?"

"Bury it."

I dug a little hole in the sand and tossed in the lupine. "Will I be going to China the same time as you? You are sure we will be sailing together?" I asked anxiously while I covered the hole and smoothed the sand.

Randall hesitated. "That's up to Kuan Yin. We have to wait and see. You can't hurry her. Once she has answered you, things only happen when she wants them to happen. But anyway, even if I should leave first, I'll come back for you."

"You promise, Ran?"

"I promise. Cross my heart, hope to die."

I looked down at my plain heavy play dress. I thought of the other clothes in my closet. "Chinese girls and ladies don't wear my kind of dresses. I'll look queer when I get to Canton."

"Don't worry. I'll bring you back tunics and robes and trousers like the ones in the windows in Chinatown, only better," Randall vowed grandly. "Yours will be made of imperial silk, like the Empress wears, from Suchow or Nanking. Just say what color."

"Green," I answered unhesitatingly. "Green like the sea; the underneath part, where the water rolls over just before the waves break."

"There could be white, too, for foam—all the sea colors."

"And gray, for the gulls, and the fog, maybe?"

"What I'd better do is bring a whole chestful. But what do you say we eat? Let's have lunch." Randall did not want to talk about silks or Canton or Kuan Yin any longer. "I'm hungry," he exclaimed. "I'm starved." In another minute we were both gobbling Sang's cheese sandwiches and cold chicken and jelly roll and oranges. After that we baited our lines for cod, and fished until Randall, with an eye on the tide, declared it time for us to climb back to the clifftop before we were in any danger of being swept off the rocks. He knew everything there was to know about the ebb and flow of tides, simply because he cared enough about the sea to ask questions and learn. He had even managed to convince Aunty of his knowledge, and that was why she let us fish at the cove alone, and why she did not worry about us.

Wrenn drove up for us, looking, as always, like a big, ugly toad perched on the box of Aunty's carriage, and when the horses had trotted back to Nob Hill, we hurried

into the house. "Is Gregory home?" Randall demanded of the parlor maid who opened the front door.

"Not yet, Master Randall."

Randall flashed me a grin. We raced upstairs and scuttled along the hall to Gregory's room. Quickly Randall unwrapped Kuan Yin from the towel and set her back on the bureau where she belonged. He grinned again, triumphantly. "I knew Greg wouldn't catch me. And he won't the next time, either."

"The next time?" My eyes widened.

"That's what I said. The next time. Asking just once mightn't be enough."

That evening when I went to bed, I debated whether or not to say my prayers, and then decided it would be much too embarrassing to kneel down on a carpet in Aunty's house as a Christian after having knelt on sand, so few hours ago, as a heathen. A line from a Sunday school hymn had come to mind: "His loving Eye, looking down from the sky." And that Eye, looking down, was surely at this moment far less loving than disapproving.

Heathens. Both of us heathens, Randall and I. Randall and I, who belonged together as sand and sea belonged, as wind and fog belonged.

I began to cry under the bed covers. It would be lonely, now those joss sticks had been lighted. A great deal to give up—that Loving Eye and Aunty and Gregory, who belonged in a different world than heathens. But I would try not to mind too much. After all, I would still have the one who counted most. I would always have him. Because even if Kuan Yin sent him off to China by himself, he was coming back for me. He had promised. And Randall always kept his promises.

❖ 5

RANDALL AND I, together in all things, always—I was so utterly sure of it. But why shouldn't I have been? Randall would go off to Chinatown by himself, Saturday after Saturday, perhaps, while I had to stay behind because I was a girl. But when he came home, he would talk for hours about what he had done, what he had seen. And then the next Saturday we would be at the cove again. Just the two of us. Never weary of each other's company, never weary of the sea. Always under the spell of wind and waves and rocks and sand.

Once Randall picked up a moonstone from the shore. It was a rarity, and to be prized, but he dropped it with offhand carelessness into my skirt pocket. "You can have it, Lilas."

"But it's beautiful! And you are the one who found it," I protested.

"Yes, but"—he was taking an enormous interest in a jellyfish that had washed high on the sand—"your eyes

are the same color—so you might as well keep it. If you want it, I mean."

I told myself I would keep it forever. But there was a hole in my pocket, and I lost it even before we went home. I consoled myself by thinking we would be going, and going, to the cove, and Randall would find me another.

And then an evening came when a first devastating doubt seized me. Would Randall someday find the cove less entralling than I, far less exciting—not enough?

The two of us were looking out the windows of what once had been our nursery and had now become "the children's sitting room." Aunty had taken Gregory to the theater. Randall was furious at being considered "too young" for *Hamlet*, and bored with our usual after-dinner games.

"Checkers! Parchesi! Lotto! And Greg gets to go to a play!" He had swept the boxes off our baize-covered table scornfully, and let their mixed-up pieces lie on the floor.

And every time the clock on the landing struck, I noticed him listen. In a curious way I felt he was marking time. But why? What for? We were not going anywhere, except to bed, when Nellie put her head in the door.

Meanwhile it was something, at least, to watch the carriages go up and down the hill filled with grownups going and coming as they chose.

It was then that I found out about Randall's night wanderings, those surreptitious, fantastic sallies that made him citizen of a world which I myself scarcely knew existed.

Our faces were pressed close to the windowpanes; otherwise, all we could have seen would have been the reflection on the glass of the brightly lighted room behind us. An airless too hot room. Gaslight hissed in the pink hand-painted globes Aunty had chosen, she said, for their cheerfulness. Randall, in dark blue serge, was running his finger

around the neckband of one of the wide white choking Eton collars he loathed. I, in black velveteen, with a close collar, too, of Irish crochet, and long thick stockings, felt itchy all over.

A room as closing in, as stuffy, as all the other rooms in Aunty's house. A prison where you had to stay until you began to grow up, like fortunate Gregory, and could do what you liked, go where you chose.

We had flattened our noses vainly against the glass; a thick, swirling gray fog hid the street from us, blotting out even the outline of lampposts, the vaguest contour of cobbled hills. "I hate being shut in a house!" The exclamation burst from me rebelliously. "I hate it. It's stupid. Stupid. If only I knew what nighttime were like. The really truly nighttime out there when it's late, when it's different . . . all dark . . . and . . . and private." I wanted to pound on the window glass. I wanted to break it, hear it smash. "Oh, Ran, if only I could go out just once, some night when it would be a secret. When no one would know. When everyone else was asleep." The preposterousness of what I was saying dropped my voice to hardly more than a guilty whisper. "If you knew how much I wanted to see what it's like!"

"You could. I do, but you wouldn't dare." It was the simple statement of a fact. And yet—that sidelong glance—was he giving me a chance? Did he mean that maybe, if . . . ? My heart began thumping. "But what about Aunty? If she caught us? Or if Gregory found out?"

Randall shrugged. "I told you you wouldn't dare."

I seized his arm. "Do you really go?" My whisper was awed, disbelieving. "When, Ran? When do you do it?"

"When I want to." Randall's hands were thrust deep in his pockets. "There is the back stair, isn't there?"

He turned from the window abruptly. He had said all he would ever say. We sat down to anagrams again, but neither of us played with any interest. Bedtime came as a relief, giving each of us an excuse to go to our own room.

I could not go to sleep. I was still awake when Aunty and Gregory came home. The house quieted after that, but I tossed restlessly. My bedroom felt as closed in, as oppressive, as the nursery. I turned my pillow, thumping it. I recited verses of poetry over and over to myself. And then with a sudden start I sat upright. What was that? The faintest of sounds, barely a sound at all, in the sleeping house.

My heart began to pound. I was out of bed with my wild surmise only half formulated, starting down the long dark upper hall. The door to the back stairs was being opened, carefully, carefully. And the sound I had heard was the small sweet dissonance of draft-stirred wind bells.

I waited. Now they were still.

Instead of climbing back into my bed between mussed sheets and pulled-out-at-the-foot blankets, I again pressed my face to a pane of glass. Aunty believed bedroom windows should be opened no more than a two-inch crack at the top.

What was Randall doing now that he had escaped from the stuffy house into that exciting, luring blackness outside? I could imagine, if only vaguely, what it would be like to scurry down the hill; I could imagine the big familiar houses on each side of the street, sleeping, as our house was sleeping. I could imagine the lawns, with their iron deer asleep, as our own iron mastiffs were asleep. I could picture the cobbles, even though I could not see them. They would be glistening with moisture, palely yellow where street lamps cast their blurred glow. But

beyond the hill, Aunty's hill, what was nighttime like?

It was not the last time I heard the wind bells. Again and again on other nights, they faintly, murmurously clashed, not only when Randall crept cautiously out of the house, but when he crept stealthily back. I never could explain to myself why—but as though a sort of premonition jerked me awake, I would start up from a sound sleep, straining to listen, with the bedclothes clutched around me. Were those the wind bells again? Yes. Randall is back.

Rigid, I would wait. Had the little sweet jangle of painted glass, that shallow draft-borne tinkle, betrayed the opening of a door, a back-stairs door that had no business swinging on its hinges this time of night?

Nellie and Teena and the parlormaid couldn't hear—they were in the attic; but what about Aunty? Or Greg? If Greg heard, he would have to tell Aunty. Gregory who was grown up and knew right from wrong. But no, Randall was safe again.

Once, out of my terror, I warned him. "Be careful. Oh, Ran, be careful."

His only reply was a curt, "Don't worry. I know about the wind bells. I won't get caught."

Listening to them on so many nights, I would ask myself, "Does Randall want me to hear them? Is that why he doesn't take them down? Aunty would never notice. Does he want me to listen and be sorry, be ashamed, of being a coward? Is he paying me back for not going with him when he gave me the chance? Or because he is the Randall who always before shared his adventures, is he trying to make up to me for what I am missing? Does he want the wind bells to say, 'Never mind, Lilas, if Aunty's house is a dull, stuffy prison and you are too afraid to leave it. We can tell you what the night outside is like. We can tell

you. Randall wants you to know. And perhaps someday you will be braver.’”

They were little tongues, talking, and before I went to sleep, I would ask them, “Where is he tonight? Has he gone to the Chinatown you came from once? Is he creeping along the narrow crooked quiet alleys he says smell a little like the basement rooms where Lew and Sang smoke their pipes? Or has he chosen a crowded street to stride along, where slant-eyed yellow people jostle and chatter in their queer, high singsong voices, no matter how late it is? Are the shop windows lighted to show off all the things to buy—the jars of ginger and the silks and the ivories and the paper dragons. Is he in a café, eating rice with chopsticks and blowing on tea too hot to drink, in blue and white cups with no saucers?

“Has he chosen the wharves where the berthed ships must look like sleeping birds, with their white canvas furled? Are there watchmen, going the rounds of the warehouses? Is he dodging from the light of their swinging lanterns? Is he hiding behind piled up lumber or bags of copra, watching the sailors that come ashore with their voyage pay?

“Or has Randall gone to the cove, even though it is so far to go afoot?”

I did not want to think of him there. Not at the cove. Not at *our* cove without me. I shut my eyes tightly. I would not allow myself to see him there. But all the same, with each sweet nocturnal whisper of the wind bells I knew in my heart that nothing was quite the same any more. Randall had begun to lead a life of his own. Separate. Apart. To Gregory, “growing up” had meant “growing away.” Would it be the same with Randall?

Wondering, I cried. . . .

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I REMEMBER now, when so many memories are stirring, that often when I waked in the morning after having heard the wind bells, my cheeks would still be wet, and even with sunlight streaming in the windows to say, "It is daytime, when all foolish fears become nothing," I would keep on thinking about Randall, who mattered more than anyone.

How could I bear it once the tiny gap already opening between us widened? And it would. Almost imperceptibly at first, but in the end, a chasm. It was inevitable, and I knew exactly how it would happen. Aunty had definite plans for both Gregory and Randall. When Gregory finished at his Latin Academy—and it wouldn't be long now—he would go off to college, off to the Harvard that was miles and miles away. He would come home only in the summers. Perhaps not even then. Boys often went to

Europe on their vacations. Or sometimes they were invited to visit their classmates' families in Maine, or in Newport, or in places called Saratoga or White Sulphur Springs. Aunty knew all about them. Aunty was always saying how important it was for California boys to make Eastern friends. It was narrow and provincial not to enlarge your life when the chance offered. And it was pleasant to know that a Spencer would be welcome anywhere, she always added, with quiet satisfaction.

Randall's turn for Harvard would come too. It would come in no time at all. Aunty would make him go whether he wanted or not. Randall would have to give in. Neither he nor I had ever been able to stand up to Aunty as bravely as we wished, or as we plotted. It was not too difficult when she was stern or cross. We made a sort of game out of defying her, getting round her; but it was dreadful when she simply looked terribly disappointed, and very gently, very sadly, told us we would be sorry, someday, when it was too late. When Aunty wasn't here any longer.

Yes, Randall would go to college no matter how black and sulky the scowl on his face. But when the four years of college were over, he would not come back to San Francisco to stay. Not to go into Spencer and Company's office where Gregory would already be eagerly making his way to the top. Instead, he would be off for China on the first ship that sailed out the Gate.

The very first ship. I could see myself, all too clearly, standing on the wharf, waving good-by. I could see myself left behind, left alone, while spread white canvas caught a brisk sea wind. And then the billowing sails would grow smaller and smaller in the distance, and not even a trace of foamy wake would mark where a ship's prow had cut

through bay water. No use waving any longer. Nothing to do but go home to Aunty's house. Nothing to do but wait until Randall came back for me.

I would blink back more tears. It was as difficult to imagine what life would be without Randall as it was to realize there had ever been a time when my only allegiance had belonged wholeheartedly to Aunty and Gregory, and when Randall's very existence had been unknown to me.

His arrival at the house on Nob Hill some two years after Gregory and I had come to live with Aunty could not have been a more complete or startling surprise to either of us. There he was suddenly in the nursery doorway one afternoon, with Aunty's plump ringed hand firm on his coat sleeve. "This is Randall, another Spencer cousin, dears," she announced brightly. "Isn't it lovely? He is going to make his home with us."

Another Spencer cousin? But there weren't any others, at least none that Aunty had ever told us about before. I dropped the silly-faced bisque doll I had been spanking on her ruffled underdrawers (Aunty was always so certain little girls loved dolls) to turn astonished eyes on the newcomer, and Gregory whirled from a chalky blackboard. We could only stare. A cousin? But no matter how surprising, there was no mistaking the fact he belonged in our family. He looked like us, that boy, standing there, only he was ugly because his same sort of nose as ours seemed too big in such a thin face.

I guessed him to be several years younger than Gregory. He had Gregory's same thick cap of black hair and Gregory's tallness. He was staring back at us out of stormy, defiant eyes the gray of mine, his hands deep in the pockets

of shabby knee trousers. His jacket sleeves did not quite cover bony wrists. His long black stockings, full of darns, were wrinkled on his skinny legs.

I had never seen a boy stand quite so straight and stiff, nor one who had backed against a door so defensively. "He doesn't like us," I thought. "He didn't want to come." I had the distinct impression he would bolt if Aunty let go of his arm. I could imagine her having dragged him, every step of the way, from wherever she had found him, and through our front door.

I felt sorry for him, with the quick sympathy of one child for another when adult authority asserts itself, but because I had no idea of what to say to a cousin so suddenly, so extraordinarily, introduced, I waited for Gregory to speak. He took his own time about it. Gravely he looked Randall up and down, and then he turned to Aunty. "You said he was going to make his home with us. Does that mean he will live in our house?"

"Yes, Gregory dear."

"Must he? I don't see why. I like it best the way it has always been—just you and Lilas and I."

It was uncompromisingly direct. A completely honest protest against intrusion by a total stranger. Aunty was his. I was his. Why should he share us? Why should anyone expect him to be pleased in the least about dividing up?

It was more than honest. It was loyal and loving and justifiable—but scarcely a welcome. I felt still sorrier for the new cousin, standing so straight and stiff, with his head high and a quick hot red running up his thin cheeks. Not knowing what better to do, I hurriedly snatched up a little carved wooden schooner from our crowded toy shelves and held it out. "Would you like it, boy?"

"Keep your old ship! Why would I want it? I could whittle one twice as good. Besides, I've got plenty of my own things to play with."

He flung it at me with the red deepening in his cheeks and his head higher than ever. But I was too young to recognize stung pride. "He is rude and horrid," I told myself. "He is not nice at all." I was as displeased as Gregory at the thought of his intrusion in Aunty's house. I picked up my doll with ostentatious interest and absorption. Gregory turned his back on the doorway and began drawing on the blackboard again. Out of the corner of an eye I saw Aunty compress her lips. She gave the nursery bell-cord a sharp pull. When one of the maids hurried in, she sent Randall off with her to unpack a small cheap trunk I later saw being carried up to the attic. It was not at all like any of the other Spencer trunks stored under the eaves. Ours were great heavy leather things with silk-lined lids and trays and brass fastenings as big and shiny as harness buckles. The name of their Paris maker was stamped inside them, and they smelled faintly of orrisroot and sachet and bay rum.

When the boy had disappeared, and Aunty, too, had left the nursery, with the pressed-together lips that showed how thoroughly ashamed she was of Gregory and me, I stole a glance at Gregory. His back was still turned, and he had nothing to say as he went on squeaking chalk across the blackboard. He was always quiet when things did not go his way, but I knew how his face could darken.

Two boy cousins, and the only difference between Gregory and that other furious boy who had just stalked out was Gregory's clothes. The boy named Randall needed someone to buy him a new suit and stockings. Remembering the darns, I found them uncomfortably disturbing.

almost shocking. Gregory and I wore darned stockings too sometimes, for every day, but the darns were only in the foot part, never up above where they would show.

I had seen newsboys with darns and shabby clothes, and hostler boys and lamplighters and chimney sweeps—but a cousin? It must mean he was terribly poor. I was again sorry for him, doubly sorry, but more than that, I was enormously intrigued. Randall's stockings and trousers and jacket took on the dramatic pitifulness of rags. Just think! A beggar boy coming to live with us. A mysterious beggar boy whom no one knew anything about. Except Aunty, of course.

It would have been a waste of time consulting a silent, displeased Gregory as to the wisdom of asking questions. I must decide for myself whether Aunty would be too provoked to answer. Not that Aunty ever stayed cross very long.

Quietly I deserted the nursery. On my way along the hall to Aunty's room, I stopped to peek cautiously through the half-open door of a bedroom that adjoined Gregory's. It was one of several spare rooms. The dust covers had been hurriedly stripped from it, the shades pulled up, and the shutters folded open. The new cousin was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking glum and utterly at a loss. I supposed it was for lack of anything better to do that he was making a cat's cradle out of a length of dirty string. It must have come out of his own pockets. Grimy twine did not lie about in Aunty's house.

"Gregory has the same kind of hands," I thought. "Thin and quick and clever. But even Gregory does not know how to make anything nearly so splendid."

The string was stretched and crisscrossed as intricately and as beautifully taut as the rigging on the schooner

model I had held out to Randall. Would he show me how if I asked him? My subjugation had begun.

I knocked eagerly at Aunty's door. I suddenly knew I wanted the new cousin to stay, and I wanted Aunty to know I was sorry for my part in his cold reception. Gregory would be sorry too, I was certain. He would like the boy once he got used to the idea of a stranger coming to stay with us. What could be more fun for him than another boy to play with instead of just me, whom he considered a baby?

Aunty was sitting at her dressing table doing her hair when I went in.

"Well, Lilas?"

"It's about the new boy, Aunty."

"Not 'the new boy,' if you please, dear. Your cousin. And you were naughty, you and Gregory. Very naughty."

"I won't be again, Aunty." And while I watched her thrust in pins and then roll iron-gray combings carefully around her finger and put them in a pale blue silk envelope embroidered with forget-me-nots, I tumbled out all my questions.

Where had the new cousin come from? Where had he lived before he and his trunk arrived at our house? Why had we never seen him before, or heard of him even? Why was he going to live with us?

I know now that Aunty's answers were what she considered suitable and sufficient for a child's ear. Randall had lived on the other side of town, she told me, and the way it was said, "the other side of town" might have been the other side of the world. "His father is dead, Lilas, like your father, and like Gregory's. His mother is dead, too. He lost her only a few days ago. And so now he needs me to look after him, just as you and Gregory need me."

"Why didn't he ever come to our birthday parties if he is our cousin? Why didn't he ever come to Christmas dinner?"

"You wouldn't understand, dear. There were a number of reasons. All sad and unfortunate, and not of any interest to children. So we won't talk about them. It wouldn't be kind to Randall to bring them up. And that is what we must always be, Lilas. Kind to one another. And will you make Aunty happy by doing your best to help Randall feel at home with us?"

"I like him," I announced decisively. "But I still don't understand why we didn't know about him."

"That's enough, Lilas. No more questions. Run back to the nursery. Why don't you ask Gregory to play a nice game of checkers? But no discussion between you about Randall, please. Aunty means it, dear. Is that quite clear?"

She knew I would mind her. Aunty's word was law. I would not even have dreamed of disobeying her, not in those days, before I had learned the exciting, dangerous delights of rebellion—if one had the courage for it.

I imagine Aunty had a private session that same afternoon with Gregory. At any rate, neither of us ever exchanged a word regarding Randall's life "on the other side of town." For myself, I lost all curiosity about the subject. In a matter of days I felt as though Randall had always been in Aunty's house. I was relieved, for his sake, and extremely glad, when the darned stockings and the shabby jacket and trousers were whisked away and his closet and bureau were stuffed with as much presentable clothing as Gregory's, but I had forgotten to think of him as "poor" or even "mysterious."

And I was more than glad that when Gregory offered for the first time, and of his own accord, to let Randall set

up his prized lead soldiers on the nursery hearth rug, Randall looked pleased.

Slowly, slowly Randall learned to take us as much for granted as we learned to take him, and a time was to come when, child though I was, I recognized him as part of myself, the other half of my being. I had accepted him as Ran who, like Gregory and me, had only Aunty to give him a home. And that was all I ever knew about him until years later, on that shattering day in late September when Kuan Yin at long last granted him his dearest wish and sent him sailing through the Golden Gate aboard the *Star of China*, bound for Canton. Only it was not really Kuan Yin at all, but Aunty, who did the sending. Canton happened to be the farthest place she could think of to banish a boy who had suddenly gotten himself into as foolish and seriously ending a scrape as Randall had managed to do.

The summer began badly from the start as far as relations went between Randall and Aunty. He had failed a term's work at the Academy simply because he was not interested enough to study; provoked, Aunty told him that he would have to tutor instead of taking a holiday. "I shan't let you come down to Menlo Park with Aunty and Lilas except on weekends, Randall. You ought to be very much ashamed of yourself. It's not as though you were a stupid boy; you could do every bit as well as Gregory if only you tried."

Gregory. The irritant beyond all irritants to Randall. He had finished his first year at Harvard with an excellent record and arrived home the last week in May. "I'm going to work in Spencer and Company all vacation," he told Aunty. "Everything I can learn now will help that much more later."

Aunty was pleased and proud. "The laborer enjoyeth

the bread of his work,' " she said at the dinner table Gregory's first evening home.

Gregory looked uncomfortable. "It's just that I happen to like the office, Aunt Edith. It's where I would rather be than any place. And there's nothing so wonderful about doing what you want to do."

"It's applying yourself to something worth while that counts," Aunty commented pointedly.

Randall's face darkened. He sat through dinner without a word. Afterward we both escaped to the old nursery. "A tutor!" he exploded. "A tutor all summer, and no vacation! I hate Aunt Edith."

"So do I." My echo was loyally vehement; I was always on Randall's side. Uneasily, though, I was thinking, "It's Ran's own fault about the tutor. He does what he chooses without thinking ahead. He knew all winter that vacation would come. He knew about our going to Menlo Park."

All our other summers we had gone to resort hotels; Aunty didn't want the responsibility of owning a country place down the Peninsula or across the bay. But this summer she had been loaned a house belonging to friends who were away in Europe, and for months Randall and I had been counting the days until school would be out.

Now, what fun would it be?

Aunty and I went down alone, except, of course, for Wrenn and Lew and Sang and Nellie and the parlormaid.

Sang produced a young nephew to cook for Gregory and Randall; Teena would make their beds, and with Rosie, who was to stay in town to help her, would give the house a thorough cleaning.

Curtains and draperies came down once a year. Carpets and rugs were beaten. Every dish and glass in the pantry, every ornament in Aunty's drawing room, every cut-crystal

prism, had a bath in soapy hot water and ammonia. Every horsehair mattress and down pillow was sent out for new ticking or a plumping up.

The summer dragged as no summer had ever dragged before.

"We aren't a family, just the two of us," Aunty fretted.
"I wish we had stayed in town with the dear boys."

We saw next to nothing of Gregory. His long hours as a sort of general office boy at Spencer and Company made travel back and forth every day to Menlo Park difficult. On weekends he had any number of Saturday noon to Sunday evening invitations for San Rafael or San Mateo or Alameda.

Everyone liked him. "It's because he has good manners," Aunty explained to me. I had thought it was because, in a quiet, reserved way, he had become extremely attractive. His dark, rather serious eyes had a way of lighting up when he smiled. Some indescribable quality about him made you want his approval.

I was a little in awe of him: he was nineteen, and he went to Harvard College.

June. July. August. The first three weeks of September, I lived for the weekends, when I had Randall to play lawn tennis or croquet with me, or to go for horseback rides through the oaks and toyon of the little woods that were part of Aunty's loaned estate, and onto the adjoining properties, and then into the foothills. .

I considered Aunty a monster for keeping him imprisoned in town with his studies five days out of seven. This was vacation!

"Everything always comes right for Gregory," I thought disconsolately. "But Gregory thinks. Gregory doesn't do the things that make trouble for himself. Or for other

people." I admitted the last of it reluctantly. But I knew it was true. Randall had spoiled my summer and Aunty's summer as well as his own. Aunty kept on loving him even when he most provoked her, and Menlo Park was no pleasanter for her than it was for me. What she wanted was for Randall to come to her and say, "I'm sorry about my marks, Aunt Edith"; and then, if he promised to try harder next term, the whole thing would have been forgotten and some one in Menlo Park found to help him catch up, in a few hours, with his lessons.

But Randall was stubborn. All Aunty and I had to look forward to were Fridays and train time, when Wrenn drove us to meet him at the little station of Fair Oaks.

Wrenn would pull up his horses in a crowd of open landaus and phaetons and pony carts filled with ladies in leghorn hats like Aunty's and mine, and thin piqué or batiste or eyelet-embroidery dresses. Then down the tracks the five-fifteen would come, tooting and puffing. As it slowed to a stop, the grinning Irish engineer would always wave, the mail sack would be tossed out, and husbands and guests would swing down from the cars.

I drew a deep relieved breath each time I saw Randall. How awful if by any chance he had missed the train. But he never did, and I always wanted to shout joyfully, "He's here! He's here!" And as Wrenn drove us back to a big sprawling wooden house, painted yellow, with white shutters and a white fanlight and wide white-railed verandas where Lew's and Sang's cookies and a pitcher of iced tea would be waiting, I would think, "Nothing can spoil it. This time the weekend will be perfect."

It never was. Without fail Aunty gently put Randall into his blackest moods.

"I'm quite sure you are studying hard, dear?" This was at the first passing of cookies.

"And how is Gregory?"

The question never brought more of an answer than an unresponsive, laconic, "How should I know?"

"You'll have a busy, happy summer just like his when you are older, so please don't sulk, Randall. Lilas, will you pour your cousin's tea? We miss you so much, dear boy. But how splendid if you start school again in the fall with all your studies caught up. And Aunty expects to be as proud of your college career someday as she is of Gregory's."

That was too much. Even Aunty knew it. With a glance at Randall, glowering at the mention of Harvard ahead, she was apt to suggest hastily that we get our tennis rackets or saddle the riding horses.

Being alone with him wasn't much better. He had little to say; he wasn't a Ran who shared anything of himself. The summer was a door closing us off from each other.

We moved up to town the last of September, and on the evening before Gregory left to go back to college, we all sat down to dinner together. Aunty's feelings would have been sadly hurt had Gregory dined out with any of his friends or suggested inviting guests to join us.

She made dinner a little farewell festivity for Gregory. He had his favorite oysters, his favorite roast beef and Yorkshire pudding and *crème brûlé*, and a goblet of Burgundy. And because "children should learn to drink like ladies and gentlemen" was an axiom of Aunty's, the water in Randall's and my glass was well colored.

After dinner Aunty accompanied me at the piano while I sang some ballads. Gregory looked at stereopticon slides.

Randall, after an indifferent glance at one or two of them, wandered restlessly around the drawing room with his hands in his pockets until Aunty corrected him with a shake of her head and a frown.

Gentlemen didn't put their hands in their pockets.

Then he subsided onto the edge of a stiff-backed satin-covered chair with his legs thrust out, his body slouching. Aunty gave him another disapproving glance, and he scowled blackly.

When the landing clock struck half past nine, Gregory put the slides away and announced he was going to bed. "I won't get a chance for another decent sleep until I'm back in Cambridge," he explained, kissing Aunty good night.

"I know, dear. Those wretched trains jerk and rattle so. But aren't there any little last minute things Aunty could come up and do for you?"

"No, thank you, Aunt Edith, there's nothing; my bags are all packed and ready."

"Good. I'm glad you can get into bed. And will you just bolt the front door, dear, as you go up, and put on the chain? The maids are apt to be forgetful."

"I'm going up, too," Randall announced quickly. He stood up, obviously relieved at a chance to escape from Aunty's constant tiny criticisms. He didn't kiss her, or give her more than a barely civil good night. "Aren't you forgetting something, Randall dear?" she suggested with quiet reproach just before he got out the door. Stiffly then he pecked at her cheek.

"You run along too, Lilas child," Aunty commanded. "But a nice hug before you go. And don't any of you forget to say your prayers and brush your teeth, will you, children?"

She reached for the embroidery bag that hung on the

back of her chair and took out a linen tea cloth and her spectacles. "I intend to finish this tedious drawn work if I have to sit here all night," she declared firmly. "I've promised it for the Guild Bazaar—and what one puts off never gets done, it seems. But nothing, absolutely nothing, is going to keep me from completing all four sides before I go to bed."

Gregory and I went upstairs. Neither of the boys was communicative. We separated at the far end of the hall and went into our rooms. On a ridiculously childish impulse, because I felt left out, miserably lonely, with Randall so moody and withdrawn, and Gregory so full of his aspiring plans for Harvard and for Spencer and Company in the future, I left my door open a crack. Wistfully I was remembering that when Randall and I were little, we exchanged scribbled wadded-up after-bedtime notes, reeled across the hall from his room to mine on long, tangling lengths of string.

But we weren't children any more. Not the boys, at least.

I undressed, feeling sorrier and sorrier for myself, and got into bed, and my light had been turned out only minutes when the wind bells began to gently clash, faintly tinkle.

A draft along the ell. Randall quietly, quietly opening the door to the back stairs. Randall stealing out into the mysterious, exciting night. Randall escaping, not only from Aunty's stuffy, proper drawing room, her rule-bound house, but from Aunty herself.

My heart began to pound, as it still pounded each night I heard that soft jangle of painted glass, no matter how familiar it had become. I had never gotten over worrying whether or not Randall would be caught. And I had never

become reconciled to the ever-growing knowledge that his nighttime excursions were a cleavage between us.

If only I weren't so cowardly. If only I didn't care what Aunty would say or do. If only I wouldn't be so terribly ashamed if ever Gregory were to see me, stealing with Randall down those beckoning, luring back stairs.

I listened until the wind bells, dangling, swaying on their cord, were silent. Or rather, silent momentarily. Were they jangling again, minutes later, or was I imagining an echo? I had begun to be drowsy, and then I fell into the light uneasy sleep usual to me the nights I knew Randall had crept out.

I was awake again, turning restlessly, when the clock on the hall landing struck two, and then once more I heard the wind bells.

Two! Two o'clock in the morning! It was late, even for Randall. I was so glad, so thankful for the wind bells' tinkle, that I lay awake hugging the knowledge of Randall's safe return and wishing, wishing I had dared to go with him. He would have wanted me; I was certain he would have wanted me. And then, because I would have finally proved I could be brave, there would never again be anything separating us—beginning to spoil things.

I was just on the edge of drifting off to sleep when drowsily, vaguely, I was conscious of sounds somewhere in the front of the house. Sounds a long way off. Who was moving about downstairs, who was talking? I listened, not sure I was awake, and then I sat up in bed, startled, uncertain. Did I know the voices? The angry loud voice, the quieter one?

I threw back the bedclothes and groped a way to the door and into the quiet dark ell outside, and then hurried along the hall, where a side bracket burned. I was shivering

with cold, and shivering with mounting apprehension as I tiptoed cautiously to the banisters and leaned over to peer into the hall below.

Wrenn was there, and Wrenn's shadow, huge and black against the stair wall. Wrenn, on the first stair, with his whip raised. Wrenn, his heavy jowled face contorted with rage. Wrenn with his little blue, blue eyes glinting like glass marbles as he tried to push past Aunty.

She had backed against the newel. She was clutching with both hands at Wrenn's raised right arm. Her embroidery thimble was still on her finger. "No, Wrenn. No. You're out of your mind. I shan't allow you to go up."

"'Allow,' Ma'am? That's a good one! And who'll stop me? Not you nor nobody else! You 'eard me, did you?"

"Aunty!" It burst from me terrifiedly.

Wrenn's whip. Wrenn's black whip that would swish and lash out.

Aunty's hands dropped from Wrenn's arm. As she stared up at me, her eyes were full of shocked, incredulous dismay. For an instant she was speechless. Wrenn's mouth was open, like the mouth of a hooked fish, as he stared.

"Lilas! What are you doing out of your bed? What do you mean by wandering about? Go back to your room at once."

Standing there in front of a servant, in front of a child, with her face drained to the color of the paste Randall and I used to smear in our scrapbooks, she was Aunty, who ruled her household, ruled the children in her charge. Or one of them. "This instant, Lilas, if you please. And Aunty will talk to you in the morning."

Facing her, I had to obey. Once in my room I bolted my door. What if Wrenn came? Who was he after? What had happened? Was Wrenn drunk? Sometimes if you went to

the stable when he didn't expect you and he was there in his shirt sleeves and leather apron polishing harness or carriage brasses, you saw a whisky bottle on his workbench. Sometimes the bulbous veined nose in his suety face was more purply-red than ever.

But if he did come, if he pushed past Aunty and I were out in the hall again, I could call Ran and Greg. Even the maids in the attic would wake up if I called loudly enough. And I couldn't stay locked in; I had to hear the rest—I had to find out.

My curiosity was too strong to resist. I opened the bolted door and paused on its threshold, listening once more. The voices were fainter, scarcely audible. As I crept to the top of the hall stairs, I wondered what Randall would say when I told him, in the morning, about Wrenn. A night adventure of my own to relate! But adventures were frightening; I shivered again, thinking of Wrenn and Wrenn's whip.

A little farther, a little farther; I prayed the floor wouldn't creak; the hall stretched ahead endlessly. Just before I got to the stairwell I stopped and listened again. Aunty and Wrenn were in the drawing room. It was impossible to see them no matter how far I hung over the banister, but I could hear the low, steady flow of Aunty's voice, and Wrenn breaking in, and Aunty, talking again.

None of it was intelligible. I had the odd feeling Aunty was sitting there, urging Wrenn to keep his voice down. I remembered the thimble on her finger; she must still have been in the quiet drawing room, embroidering her tea cloth when Wrenn stormed into the house.

It would be like a bad dream, looking up and seeing him. But why hadn't she called out, as I had thought of calling? Some one would surely have awakened. None of it

was understandable. All of it had a dimension of unreality.

I drew back hurriedly from the banister as Aunty and Wrenn came out of the drawing room, and I waited only until Wrenn turned into a hall passage leading to the pantries and kitchen before I scuttled to my room and into bed.

My bed was all I suddenly wanted. My safe, warm bed. And when I was in it, curled in an icy ball, my arms hugging my body, my teeth chattering, I fell asleep before I could even begin to solve the puzzle.

Nellie woke me when it was time to get up for the early "children's breakfast" which Gregory and Randall and I had always shared. Aunty demanded the strictest punctuality at meals. Even a big boy like Gregory was expected to sit down promptly, but neither he nor Randall joined me that awful last morning.

As I tried to eat my oatmeal and drink my cocoa, and while I was glancing uneasily again and again at Randall's empty place, Nellie brought me a message from Aunty. "You're to go up to her room, Miss Lilas. Straight away, she says, with no dawdling. And you won't keep her waiting if you know what's good for you. She's all on edge this morning. There's plans come up that has to be settled in a rush, she told me when I took in her tray. And she couldn't sleep, she said, with it all on her mind to think over."

My stomach was churning queasily as I went into Aunty's room. I knew my apprehensions were justified, I knew something dreadful had happened the moment I saw her. "Shut the door, Lilas," she said quietly enough, "and come here, dear." But her face, which had been the color of paste when she looked up at me from the foot of the stairs, was the gray of ashes on a cold hearth. I wanted to

turn and run. Aunty took my hand. "You must listen," she told me quietly. "You are fifteen years old, Lilas. You are not a baby even though I think of you as one; I should have to tell you what has happened sometime, and it is kinder to do it now, and have it done with, put behind us. The sooner you know, the sooner you will forget Randall, the easier it will be to forget."

"Forget?" I repeated it bewilderedly.

"Yes. Forgetting Randall is what all of us will have to do. You and Gregory and I." Aunty's voice was steady, controlled. "I can't let him stay at home, Lilas. He doesn't deserve to stay." She was standing by her bureau, and she put out a hand to grip hard on a silver and tortoise-shell comb. "I have thought it all out. The *Star of China* sails Saturday. A place can be made for him in our Canton office. It's providential, the sailing."

"But, but why? I don't understand." I stared blankly at Aunty. And then I blurted, "Last night? Wrenn?"

"Yes. All of what you saw is part of—of what I must tell you about Randall."

Horridly, the breakfast cocoa and the oatmeal I had tried to swallow were in my throat. But whether or not I looked as sick as I suddenly felt, Aunty did not soften what she had to say. Through waves of dizzy nausea I heard her talking, talking, as I had heard her talking last night. "It was Rosie's day off, and . . ."

Rosie? What did Wrenn's stepdaughter, Rosie, have to do with Randall being sent away?

". . . she told Wrenn she was going out with friends. But it got late, and Wrenn was worried when she didn't come home. He had never known her to be late before. But of course"—Aunty gripped the comb harder—"but of

course Wrenn was with us in Menlo Park all summer, and . . .”

What did Aunty mean? What was she trying to say?

“. . . and so he waited up; and when she didn’t come, he went to her bedroom and looked through her closet and bureau. He wondered if she intended to stay away for always.”

“Stay away?” I echoed it stupidly. “Why would Rosie stay away?”

“Girls do sometimes, Lilas. Certain kinds of girls. Girls like Rosie, who are pretty and . . . You wouldn’t understand, but sometimes they run away. They decide they don’t want to live at home, or they don’t want to be housemaids.” Quietly, smoothly, Aunty’s voice went on and on. “None of Rosie’s things were gone, but Wrenn found a handkerchief in a drawer, with shells tied up in it, hidden under her aprons. And so he guessed who she was with and where she might be.”

“Shells?” For some reason I could barely force out the word. And it was such a simple word.

“Shells, Lilas, and fronds of seaweed, being dried and pressed between two blotters, and a bunch of withered flowers. Yellow lupine.” The terrible clarity, the terrible exactness of what Aunty was saying went on and on. “The shells were the little scalloped fan-shaped sort Wrenn has seen you and Randall bring home for years—ever since Randall discovered that cove of yours. And the handkerchief was a boy’s handkerchief, with *R. S.* embroidered on it.”

“It’s not true! I don’t believe you.” I snatched at Aunty’s arm. “Everything at the cove is *ours*. Ran’s and mine. No one else’s.” I cried it out wildly. “Rosie couldn’t have

gone to the cove. She couldn't. No one goes, ever, but Ran and I. Ran wouldn't take anyone——”

“Child, child!” Aunty's gray face pitied me.

“There was more than shells or seaweed or lupine to tell Wrenn where Rosie might have gone or that she had been there other nights. There was sand on her closet floor.” Aunty looked away from me, saying it. “Sand brought in on her clothes.”

“What did Wrenn do?” I had to know. I couldn't bear not knowing.

“He harnessed the horses, and drove to the cove to look for her. It is all very terrible, very unfortunate, Lilas. There had been an accident. Wrenn found Rosie at the foot of the cliff. She had slipped. She was dead. If the tide had come in, she wouldn't have been lying on the rocks. You see, Lilas, and this is the hardest part, this is the part that makes Aunty feel so badly and will make you feel so badly, Randall had run off and left her.”

“You shan't say it! You shan't!” I faced Aunty furiously. “You are making it up. Wrenn made it up. Ran isn't like that. He wouldn't run. He wouldn't.”

“Shh, child. Shh! Please, Lilas, not so loud.”

Aunty gathered me close, imploring me not to raise my voice. “It has to be a secret. And you must be Aunty's dear, good little girl and believe what she says. Because Aunty knows it is true. Wrenn saw wheel marks at the top of the cliff; his lantern showed them. Randall had hired a buggy, and after he—after it happened, he drove off.”

I burrowed in Aunty's arms, making small incoherent hurt sounds.

“Wrenn carried Rosie up the cliff and put her in the carriage and drove her back to the stable. And then he

burst into the house. He—he wasn't quite himself. He wanted to whip Randall. It frightened Aunty at first, frightened her very much, the part you saw, Lilas. But then I thought of a way to make it come out right." She was rocking me, patting me.

Her voice was calm, steady, soothing. "I promised Wrenn a great deal of money if he would do what I asked. I had to beg him. He wouldn't listen at first. But then I made him understand what the money could buy for him. A ticket back to England. A piece of land. His own little cottage. All the comfort he could want for his old age, if only he would do what Aunty wanted him to do—take Rosie away, and not touch Randall."

"Take Rosie away?"

"Yes, Lilas. Into the country. He'll find a place. This is a sad, hard part, too. But Aunty knows best. Because if the police should find out about the cove, the accident, if they should come here, and——"

"The police!" I jerked out of Aunty's arms to gasp it. I was suddenly shivering.

"The police always come, Lilas, when there has been an accident. A fatal accident. And Randall did something very foolish, very unworthy, in taking Rosie to the cove. Not just last night, but other nights. And there would be gossip, Lilas. The ugliest kind of gossip. Talk and the newspapers. You can't possibly know, you can't possibly understand what it could be like. But Aunty understands."

Looking back now, remembering, with all of it fitted together, I wonder why the comb in Aunty's hand didn't snap.

"It is against the law, Lilas, for anyone to bury a body secretly, but that is what I have asked of Wrenn. I asked it because I love all of you so much, so very dearly. And I

persuaded him it was best for everyone. Best for poor Rosie's sake. Rosie was foolish, too, and her name would be in the papers as well as Randall's."

"I don't believe. I still don't believe it. Ran wouldn't have taken her to the cove. And he wouldn't have run away, no matter what."

"Ah, child, child." Aunty smoothed my hair from my forehead. "Nothing in the world hurts as much as finding out people aren't what we think. You are having to learn too early. But you must be brave. And once it is all talked out, we will forget it." The quiet words kept coming. They had no end.

"When Wrenn left the house to—to do what had to be done for Rosie, I went into Randall's room. He was in bed, pretending to be asleep. But his clothes were flung about, dropped anywhere, in a hurry, and I saw his jacket was still damp with fog. It was thick out last night, Lilas. And the jacket wasn't the one he wore for dinner; it was an old jacket. He had changed."

Ran—Ran—going out into the dark night. Aunty's bedroom tilted and spun round, and her voice went on endlessly.

"I told him to get up and dress, and that I had questions. He looked guilty—he was frightened. But when I asked him if he had been out, he said Yes. And then I asked him to tell me where, and about Rosie." Aunty's face suddenly crumpled. Her chin jumped. Her lips trembled. "I wanted it to come from him. I wanted him to admit what—what he knew. I wanted to give him the chance to unburden himself. I've always been so sure you children felt you could come to me with anything. Even something as serious as this. And besides, Lilas, it was all so difficult for Aunty to go into. I couldn't. I couldn't."

Aunty had to stop, and steady her voice. "But Randall only stared at me for a moment, as though he didn't know what I was talking about. And so then I told him I knew Rosie was dead. I"—Aunty faltered, and went on—"I told him I realized how easily an accident could happen. And I kept hoping he'd confide in me. Instead, he flew into one of his tempers. He denied being at the cove; he swore he had never been near it with Rosie, last night or any night. Oh, Lilas, Lilas, he has been difficult so many times. He has worried me so often. He's never been like you and Gregory. But to think he could lie! A lie is the most terrible thing in the whole world. I couldn't bear listening to Randall. And I told him then that I would have to send him away. But I tried so hard to give him just one more chance. I begged him to at least let us have the truth between us before he left." Aunty's voice broke again.

"He stared at me again, as though he couldn't believe what I'd said. 'You are going to send me away because Rosie had an accident?' he asked." Aunty was trying not to cry, and as she patted me, tried to soothe me, she was reciting it all carefully, word for word, to make it entirely clear to me, to have it something forever over, forever put aside. "I told him Yes, I had quickly thought it all out after Wrenn came to me. He was to sail the day after next for Canton, aboard the *Star of China*. And then, Lilas, he hurt me so. His whole face changed. His expression. He suddenly looked hard. I don't know any other word for it—hard. And defiant. 'Very well, Aunt Edith,' he said. 'If that's the way you want it, it's the way I want it. And the sooner I get out of this house, the better it will suit me.' "

Aunty put her hand to her throat and made herself

swallow. "But we won't speak of it any more, Lilas. We must try our best not to think about it." Aunty was no longer Aunty crumbling as she said it. She was Aunty struggling, yes, against tears that welled rebelliously, but she was Aunty in command. "You realize, of course, Lilas, that what I have told you is a secret? The deepest secret? It has to be for all our sakes. I want your word of honor you will never repeat any of this. Not a word. Ever. Do you promise? Say it after me, Lilas, 'I promise, Aunty.' "

"I promise." It came out in a stunned, obedient whisper.

"I knew I could trust you. Gregory knew, too. He told me you would never, never give Randall away."

"Gregory?"

"I had a talk with him just before I sent down for you, Lilas. He couldn't believe it at first, any more than you or I. He's very much upset. I can't let him go off today. I've asked him to stay until Randall has left." Aunty's lips shook again. She waited, and then went on, "Gregory will be a comfort to me. A comfort to you, too, Lilas, if you let him into your life. Aunty knows, and he knows, you have only wanted Randall. But Gregory is good, Lilas, a good, fine boy, and he loves us. Truly loves us. But now you must run along. Aunty has a great many things to see to. One more warning, though, child. You must be very brave, very careful, when we say good-by to Randall tomorrow in front of the maids and Lew and Sang."

They had not heard Wrenn. They had not seen him. But what would Aunty tell them about Rosie?

"It would be wise, perhaps, to stay in your room today, Lilas." With my hand on the doorknob I listened to Aunty's final admonishings. "And don't try to talk to Randall, my dear. He doesn't want to see any of us, I'm quite certain. 'The sooner I get out of this house . . .' If

you had heard him. . . ." Aunty was turning the rings on her hand. "I've tried so hard to bring up you children. And to think I failed with Randall. I don't see how—I can't understand. . . ."

It had never occurred to me before that a grownup would struggle for self-control. Rosie was suddenly all the more dead for those crowding, fiercely held back tears in Aunty's eyes, and for the first time Randall's responsibility for her death loomed, devastatingly, as something I had to accept. Randall, making Aunty cry because of his foolish self-willed thoughtlessness. Randall on the steep high clifftop, in the treacherous dark with Rosie. Randall running away. Each enormity was a horror. I couldn't stay and look any longer at Aunty. I couldn't listen to any more.

I turned, in a panic, and rushed out of Aunty's bedroom to my own, slamming the door and sagging against it, shaking and sick. "I hurt. I hurt all over," I kept thinking. "I hurt too much to bear it," and then I stumbled to the bed and sank on it in a miserable huddled heap. The hurt was as real as a pummeling or a stoning. All those words of Aunty's coming at me. The slow, bewildered realization of what they meant.

I don't know how I got through the day. I stayed in my bedroom as Aunty had suggested. I don't know what Randall did; he had seaman's gear to buy and pack, and ship's articles to sign, I supposed dully. He would have to go down to the wharves. No one there knew about Rosie. No one knew he had run away and left her, thinking the tide would come. Our tide, rolling in, rolling in, from China.

Nellie brought my lunch on a tray. "It's soup and junket, seeing you've got a sore throat, Miss Lilas. 'Something to go down easy,' your Aunt told me."

It was the least of Aunty's careful fabrications, I was to discover.

Fabrications. I wonder if it was a word Aunty herself, who abhorred lies, ever fell back upon to mitigate her falsifying? She never said. I never asked. Never. She had done the best she could for all of us, no matter how it hurt her or where the pain struck deepest.

She came in to talk to me again, just after my lunch tray was taken away. Her face was still gray, and her eyes, different, not quite Aunty's eyes—but they were dry.

Her hair was carefully waved—Nellie had crimped it on the curling tongs—and she wore one of her nicest silk dresses. Her blue enamel Swiss watch was pinned to the bodice by its gold fleur-de-lis. She had a nice orrisroot-lavender smell.

"You must listen to me carefully, Lilas." She sat down by my bed, where I was still collapsed. I wanted to pull the covers over my head. But she was like God; she was someone from whom you could not get away.

"Naturally the maids and Lew and Sang are wondering where Rosie is." Her voice was entirely controlled, entirely her own voice. "I have told them Rosie is on her way to New York."

"New York? But Rosie is dead."

"Hush. You are never to say that, Lilas. Rosie has left for New York. Wrenn drove her to the station early this morning, in time to take the Overland." The steady quiet voice stating it, the Aunty's-but-not-quite-Aunty's eyes holding mine, hypnotized me.

The monotone went on and on. "Wrenn happened to drop in on a friend last evening—a coachman friend who is off to New York this morning with the same family that has engaged Rosie."

Aunty's eyes held mine relentlessly. I could not possibly have looked away. "The man told Wrenn his employer's wife was desperate for someone to take charge of her two small children on the trip. Their nursery maid had been taken ill at the last minute. It was most inconvenient. An emergency. The mother herself is unwell. And none of the employment agencies could find anyone for her on such short notice. No really nice girl, the right sort like Rosie, with references."

There was still no inflection, no halt, in that appalling going-on, going-on of words. "The woman was willing to pay anything at all in wages, and the position would be permanent. Wrenn knew it was Rosie's chance. She has always been restless, and she wanted to travel. And in the spring the family will be going to Europe." There was a first, and almost imperceptible, pause then. Aunty was turning her rings again. "Rosie was sorry she hadn't time to say good-by. The woman wanted her at the station as early as possible this morning."

She knew how weak it all sounded. How weak and implausible all of it was, even to the fifteen-year-old listening. And yet she had gone down to the pantry, out to the kitchen, with it. She had dared them openly to call Miss Edith Spencer a liar, no matter how much they gossiped, how much they speculated behind her back.

Perhaps, though, they accepted Rosie's abrupt departure realistically? The thought only occurred to me years later, when I was no longer such a child. They might well have exchanged glances that meant, "Miss Edith wasn't born yesterday! She's smart, bundling a pretty ripe girl like Wrenn's Rosie off to New York. You don't take chances when you've got two young gentlemen like Master Gregory and Master Randall in the house."

They were all in the hall the next day, just after lunch, Nellie and Teena and the current parlormaid and Lew and Sang, to shake hands with Randall before he left. And what did they think about his sudden leave-taking? Nothing very much, probably. Every one knew that when a ship was ready to sail, she sailed, and for years Randall had talked of nothing but the sea, the sea and China. So if the *Star* was weighing anchor, if there was a vacant berth aboard her, and if Miss Edith had given her consent, well, why shouldn't Master Randall take off?

Gregory was in the hall too, standing next to Aunty and me. Aunty had made me come downstairs. "I won't listen to anything else, Lilas. You must do your part. You must help."

The carriage was waiting at the curb with Wrenn on the box. Wrenn, who yesterday had seen Rosie to a train. I caught myself glancing out the front door at him and then looking quickly away, only to glance again. I did not know what I expected to see. But he was merely Wrenn, reins in hand. And yet how could he possibly be the same? How far down the highway had he driven before coming to a secluded enough spot? With what had he dug—a pick and shovel, quietly borrowed from the gardener's tool-house?

Too, he was a Wrenn willing to stay on in Aunty's employ. Could that mean he was more than ever the Wrenn who, Randall had said, begrudged us our Spencer place in life? By staying, he could make Aunty suffer every time she saw him. Gregory would suffer. I would suffer. Those little hard blue malicious eyes of his meeting ours would never let us forget Rosie. And to remember Rosie would be to remember Master Randall.

Repelled, I turned my back to the door, and on Wrenn

out there at the curb, whom I would recognize, as I grew older, for what he was—a disgruntled, envious opportunist. Whisky-soaked. Sadistic. Greedy. And thinking himself in the driver's seat indeed, elevated so high and secure on the box of Aunty's carriage.

I was no happier when I looked toward the stairs. Randall was coming down in his gray town suit with a seaman's canvas bag slung over his shoulder. He was smiling; his head was high, his eyes, defiant and bright. The smile was new. I had never seen him wear one like it.

Aunty stepped forward. Her lips grazed his cheek. "Good-by, Randall," I heard her murmur.

"Good-by, Aunt Edith." Randall's head went even higher.

"Good-by," Gregory was saying. "Have a good voyage." He was as quiet and controlled as Aunty, acting his part equally well in front of the servants, but he did not shake hands with Randall, and I saw him look up at the clock on the stair landing and then quickly look away, not wanting anyone to notice. "He is afraid the *Star* might sail on the tide without waiting for Randall," I told myself. "He is as ashamed of Randall as Aunty and I, and as frightened. If anyone found out about Rosie before Randall left, if the police should come . . ."

But they wouldn't. Not while Aunty had enough money. For the first time in my life I thought consciously, "I am glad Aunty is rich."

Aunty gave me a little push forward as though I were a wind-up doll being made to walk. "Hurry and say good-by, child. Randall wants to get off."

"Good-by." My whisper was so small it was nothing.

"Good-by, Lillas." The bravado in Randall's bright defiant eyes was suddenly gone. He stood looking at me, took

an irresolute step forward and let the sea bag drop from his shoulders, and then in a rush, he pulled me close, and put his mouth down on my mouth, hard, hard.

"Ran!" I cried out heartbrokenly. I clutched at his sleeve. But he pushed past me and snatched up his bag, and shot past us all, out the door and down the front steps, past the iron urns with their pink geraniums, past the iron mastiffs on the lawn.

The carriage door slammed. Wren flicked the horses with his whip. *Clop, clop. Clop, clop.* Down the hill. Turn the corner at Pacific Street. Clatter along the Embarcadero. Swing onto the wharves at Battery and Front. And then it would be Spencer and Company's pier.

I broke away from Aunty as she tried to put her arms around me and fled to my room. All the tears that had not come before poured out in floods. And while I sobbed, huddled on the bed, my hands cupped themselves over my mouth, cherishing, saving, the touch of a kiss hard as a bruise.

What was left of the afternoon faded. The sun left my window. The stair landing clock struck five and then six. By now, I knew, the *Star of China* had been towed out into midstream. She had sailed through the Gate, with the narrows and Point Bonita and Point Lobos left behind, and the Farallons no more than two rocky specks passed to starboard. Salt spray would be flying from her black bow with its gilded figurehead. All around her white pelicans and long-necked black cormorants and screaming gulls would dive for supper scraps from the galley. Randall would see schools of leaping porpoise. Randall, at sea. Randall on his way, at last, to the East.

It could have been the most beautiful day of his life.

Oh, why, why, had it turned out the ugliest? Why had it happened this way?

I had wept all the tears I had to weep, and I was lying exhausted and limp, hiccuping, sniffling, when Gregory knocked at the door and walked in. He came over to the bed and put a hand on my shoulder. "I am glad you have stopped crying. I could hear you. Ran isn't worth it. And if it hadn't been this, it would have been something else. It's true, Lilas, whether we want to believe it or not. He's no good. He is going to be like his mother. Aunty has always been afraid of how he'd turn out."

And then Gregory told me Randall's mother was a whore. I didn't know what the word meant until Gregory explained. "She was bad, like those women who live in the houses with the shades pulled down, even in daylight, that we pass driving downtown. Randall's father got drunk one night and married her. No one in the family spoke to him again. But when Aunty heard they had both died of typhoid fever, she took Ran in."

Ran. Ran. The thin dark eight-year-old I remembered, standing in the nursery doorway, defensive, proud-eyed.

"How do you know about the—the whore—part?" I whispered, with the new word like a nasty taste in my mouth.

"Things like that get around. Boys, older boys, hear them. Lots of people know. And it's time you knew, too. Time you knew Ran doesn't belong in 'our family. That he wouldn't fit in, ever, even if Aunty had let him stay. I hope we never see him again." There was more than disdain or disgust in Gregory's voice. "I wish he were dead. If the *Star* sank I'd be glad." It burst from him vehemently. "But you wouldn't be glad, would you, Lilas?" Suddenly he had hold of my wrists. "You would start cry-

ing again, and keep on till you were blind. You know you would."

"Let go. Let go, Greg! You're hurting. And just wait and see if I care what happens to Ran. I don't. I don't. But why shouldn't I cry if the *Star* went down? The *Star* is the *Star*. She will always be the *Star*. Always, no matter what."

"She wouldn't be the *Star* if she didn't belong to a Spencer. Not the same *Star*. And if she weren't ours any longer and if you couldn't go aboard her, you would put her out of your mind. It's what you've got to do."

He was like Aunty, saying, "Forget, forget," and wanting me to be free of Randall, trying to help me to be free. He dropped my wrists. "Wait, Lilas, wait. I want to get something." He was gone for a quick moment, and then he was back in my room. "Look. It's for you." He put his treasured rice bowl from Chinatown on the bed. "You always admired it. I want you to have it." He hesitated, and one of the smiles that could be so rarely sweet curved his lips. "I want us to be friends. I want us to be . . ." He hesitated again, with something almost like shyness. "I want us to be close. The way it was in the beginning. I used to think you belonged to me when it was just you and Aunt Edith and I."

He did not realize how little I could remember of a time when there were only three of us. He sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket for me to blow my nose in and mop at my eyes. He began, sensibly, quietly, to talk about school that would be starting for me in a few days and the French prize I had planned to try for and about his going off to college. He talked about the letters he would write, telling Aunty and me about everything he did. "And you must write me.

And be sure you get on with your dancing lessons. Men like girls to dance well, and before you know it, Lilas, you'll be grown up, you will be coming out, and there'll be balls."

Nothing of what he said meant anything to me, but having him there, having someone as kind, for all his awesome college-boy status, and so much nearer my age than Aunty, was a comfort. He lit the gaslights, and a warm yellow glow drove the dusk and the shadows from my room.

He put the rice bowl on my bureau and told me he would bring me flowers for it the next day, before he went back to Cambridge. What would I think of gardenias to float in it? Did I like white flowers? He did. They were his favorites.

He talked and talked, not expecting me to put in a word or even listen, but when the dressing gong rang, half an hour before dinner, he reached out and touched my hand. "Will you come down to dinner, Lilas? Please. We've got to help Aunt Edith. And we have to start in now; right now, this first night. Say you'll come down. You can, you know, if you try. You can do anything if you want to enough."

"I'll come," I agreed weakly, my voice muffled in my pillow. "But, oh, Greg."

"Don't cry, you mustn't. Listen, someone's knocking. It's probably Nellie to do your hair."

He stayed until Nellie came in, and then he went off to his own room to change. Nellie brushed my hair and tied it back with a black velvet bow, and buttoned my cream wool English challis with more black velvet run through the beading of its square yoke and ruffled wristbands. A dress that came to my shoe tops now that I was

fifteen and, as our seamstress put it, "shooting up, and getting ready to be a young lady, with whalebones already needed in her bodice tops."

We were in the dining room then. The three of us, sitting down, Aunty putty pale but chattering brightly. Gregory, quiet, grave, considerate, and oddly old-looking. There was never again to be any boyishness about him. I, spent and sick, with the hurting worse, and everything apart from the hurt a daze.

"Your poor swollen eyes! You must bathe them with witch hazel before you go to bed, child," Aunty observed over dessert for the benefit of Lew and the waitress passing soufflé and a silver pitcher of cream. "And I know you are far too unselfish to do any more crying. Only think how happy Randall must be this very minute! He is off to Canton at last, after all his wishing, for so long." She ate a spoonful of soufflé. "Tell Sang it is very nice," she instructed Lew graciously.

She was gentle and loving when my bedtime came. She followed me upstairs and tucked me in as though I were a little girl.

"Aunty's dear sensible Lilas," she whispered as she leaned down to kiss me. "Aunty's good Lilas, who is going to go to sleep."

To sleep, and to forget, was what she meant. And forgetting would come simply, naturally, to a child.

She didn't know that night after night, for months, I was haunted by thoughts of Wrenn's drive down the highway on a ghastly September morning, just before dawn.

Aunty's fine carriage bowling along with yellow-haired, broken-necked Rosie laid on the floor under Aunty's plush lap robe. Wrenn would have closed her eyes. You did it for dead people. Wasn't it with pennies, sometimes?

There were other questions, asking and asking themselves. One in particular began to nag me. Had Aunty told me everything there was to tell? She thought of me as a child. She treated me as a child. And so did Gregory, at least almost as much so. Was there something, then, both had agreed not to discuss in front of me? Yes, there must be, I decided uneasily. Otherwise, why need so great a secret have been made of Rosie's accident?

Anyone could slip and fall. You could fall down your own stairs. And even though Randall had been a coward and run off, and even though Randall had lied, even though the police would have had to hear it explained, couldn't Randall have been forgiven even if he could not be excused? Why did Aunty have to send him away? Why should Aunty have begged Wrenn so hard to take money? And why couldn't Rosie have a grave in a cemetery, with a cross on it?

None of it was understandable. I gathered my courage and went to Aunty with my questions, but all she said was, "I told you we wouldn't discuss it ever again, Lilas. You must remember that Aunty knows best, that Aunty did what was best."

I couldn't go to Gregory. Gregory was at Harvard.

None of it could be put in letters. And so I made up my mind to forget, just as Aunty and Gregory hoped I would. I would try my hardest. Certainly I had no desire to remember.

The forgetting was not easy, however. And I developed a little nervous habit of putting a hand to my lips whenever, for a flashing moment, I felt Randall's mouth on mine, teaching me what a boy's fierce kiss could be like.

㉙ 7

GREGORY HAD GONE BACK to college two days after the *Star* sailed away, and Aunty and I were left behind in a house filled with a hundred daily reminders of Randall; to me, at least, he was still there, to me seen anywhere, any time. In the upper hall, from whose turns and ells the bedrooms opened; and the sitting room that had been the old nursery; on the steep turn of the stairs he had raced up so often. He was always the same, invading my thoughts. A thin-faced black-haired boy, looking at me out of incalculable gray eyes. A wild, rebellious boy whose mouth could be stormy or merry in a moment. A boy whose single creed was, "I must be who I am, what I am. I must be Randa'l, and no one else."

I put away from me any image of Randall the liar, Randall the coward who had let Rosie die alone on the rocks of our cove.

Merely to know that Randall had gone was devastating enough. There were days and days when the smell of the sea blowing in on a westerly wind was stronger than I could bear. Inconsolable longing seized me. I threw myself on my bed and gave way to passionate weeping, and would think, "I have been cut in two. Nothing will make me whole again."

The house had anything but a cheerful atmosphere as the wretched fall and winter months dragged by. Aunty was busy, as usual, with her charities and her church committees and her friends, and determinedly wore a smile most of the time; but just as she always knew by my red eyes when I had been crying, I was perfectly aware of those hours when she, too, shut herself in her bedroom.

I was glad for her sake that Gregory wrote often. Her whole day was brighter when the mailman left a letter with a Cambridge postmark. And in each letter Gregory instructed her at length to give Lilas his love. Lots of it.

No word at all came from Randall. Not a single contrite line. And by spring a message of some sort could have reached us, either written or sent by word of mouth, if he had cared enough. But our only news of him was a blunt report in April from the *Star of China*'s captain. Randall had jumped ship in Canton, he wrote. He and Spencer and Company's various agents had done their best to find him, but he was too clever for them; somewhere along the teeming waterfront he had disappeared without a trace.

Aunty made a point of giving a little tea party for her intimates the week after the captain's report arrived, and, as always, she insisted I come into the drawing room and shake hands and help the maids pass sandwiches.

Her guests could not have been more understanding and sympathetic when she carefully let drop that her head-

strong, independent Randall had decided to strike out on his own in the Orient, ". . . though why on earth he ever got such an absurd notion! But these young people, you know, they will take the bit in their teeth." The indulgent, almost amused, attitude she assumed as she filled cups from the big silver teapot and the hot-water kettle with its alcohol flame not only covered the crudest hurt, the deepest anxiety, but saved her pride, which mattered most, by quashing awkward questions before they could be asked. All the chattering ladies nodded resignedly and agreed that so often boys would be boys, with very little to be done about it, more was the pity.

Aunty, indomitable Aunty, had carried it off superbly. How did she find the courage? I cannot imagine now as I look back and so much is clear that was then utterly obscured.

When summer came, Gregory stayed on in the East to make the rounds of visits Aunty had predicted. Unselfishly he demurred about accepting his invitations; he would be deserting us, he wrote, unless he came home. Aunty, by return mail, insisted he must not give us a thought. He was to go about and enjoy himself. It would be the greatest pity to spend his summer with an old woman and a little girl. It was the way she still thought of me. To Aunty, I was the veriest child.

On the day Aunty had the maids empty Randall's bureau drawers and wardrobe and close his room, she took me to the Palace for lunch, and to a matinee. When we got home, everything of him was gone from the house. Nothing was left but emptiness. I couldn't find him on the stairs or in the hall. I couldn't find him in the ell where the wind bells hung. But that night I started up in bed, thinking I heard a faint sweet jangle, and when I realized I had

dreamt it, I sobbed until morning. And then I took the wind bells down, wrapped them in an old newspaper, and shoved them deep in the trash barrel outside the kitchen door.

Gregory's letters came regularly. Still nothing from Randall. We got through another winter, and then, with summer, and more visits, Gregory came home for a few short weeks before the fall term of his senior year.

He was the same Gregory he had always been, except for seeming more grown up than ever, to my eyes, and at the same time far less awesomely superior and remote.

"I've missed you, Aunt Edith," he confided at the dinner table his first evening. "And I've missed Lilas. I wish I hadn't wasted so much of the summer with other people. Will you both help me make up for it?"

And so, because he loved us, even though Randall didn't, we were Aunty and Gregory and Lilas, just the three of us again, the way he had wanted to keep it in the beginning.

We lunched together, dined together often those few weeks left in September. We explored all the curio shops. "Choose something really nice for your collection, dear boy," Aunty would fondly urge, opening her purse. We went to auctions. Almost invariably the hammer banged down on young but perceptive Mr. Gregory Spencer's bid for a small fine piece of porcelain or enamel.

"I am spoiling you dreadfully." It was Aunty's stock lament each time she pressed money into Gregory's hand.

"Am I expected to object?" I can see Gregory's teasing, affectionate smile. "And don't worry, Aunt Edith; I promise to pay back every penny the minute I'm head of Spencer and Company."

He spent his mornings at the office, but often, in the

afternoons, we took drives into the country to get away from the thick cold summer fogs that swathed the city. Aunty had bought a new carriage almost immediately after Randall went away. It was one more way to help us forget Rosie's accident. I used to wonder if it made the forgetting easier for Wrenn, too.

Sometimes we paid calls down the Peninsula. Sometimes we crossed on the paddle-wheeled ferryboats to newly fashionable shady-laned San Rafael. Or perhaps Aunty chose old-fashioned Alameda, where we drank lemonade and fanned ourselves in the latticed belvederes of gardens that drowsed under pepper trees and magnolias and were sweet with the scent of lemon verbena, bright with cockscomb and asters.

The calls were on Aunty's friends; Gregory understood why, as well as I, even though we never discussed it between ourselves. Aunty was showing off Gregory. Aunty was proving that at least one of the boys she had raised was sensible and steady, and much too fond of his home to sail off to China like his much-loved but vagabond adventurous cousin.

We drove to tennis matches and trotting races. I was proud to be seen in public with a cousin as impressive as Gregory, whose tailoring and manner and speech bespoke a Harvard man.

"Not one single other girl I know has a cousin or a brother half as—as"—I searched for the perfect word—"half as *distingué* as you," I told him with satisfaction.

He didn't laugh at my French. "I feel extremely complimented," he answered gravely. "It means a great deal to me that I meet your approval."

One evening when I had been sent off to the Friday Assemblies in charge of a maid, and with my strapped kid

dancing slippers in a satin drawstring bag, he stopped in after a dinner engagement of his own, to bring me home in Aunty's carriage.

"I left early on purpose," he explained. "Aunt Edith says I may take you to Girard's for an ice."

Everyone went to Girard's Confectionery. It was an entirely proper place for a schoolgirl to go, accompanied by an older cousin. And so while the maid dozed in the carriage and Wrenn waited on the box, Gregory seated me at a little gilt-legged marble-topped table and ordered two mocha suprêmes.

"They are the best," he stated, and I was glad he had chosen for me. Making one's own choice was always difficult, whether it was an ice or anything else. Taking one, you gave up another.

"Did you have a good time at the Assembly?" Gregory asked as we dipped in our spoons. "You had a lot of partners. Is there any one you especially like?"

"No."

"No one you'd rather dance with? No boy you think about more than another?"

"No." And there wasn't. Not a boy at the Assemblies.

"Will you write to me this winter and tell me about yourself and what you are doing?"

"There's nothing to tell. And Aunty writes you every week."

"Letters from you would be nice, too. I'll count on them, so don't disappoint me, Lilas."

The day Gregory left for college again, Aunty and I saw him off at the ferry. Just before he got out of the carriage, he gave a strand of my long hair a little jerk.

"Do you know something? You'll be beautiful when you put up that mane of yours."

"Which won't be for another year," Aunty interposed quickly. "Lilas is a child."

"She is seventeen, Aunt Edith. When are you going to give her a debut party?"

"A debut? I haven't considered the question. There is plenty of time. I don't approve of little girls being pushed into young womanhood."

"But think of all the impatient suitors!" Gregory laughed. "It wouldn't be fair to keep them waiting too long for Lilas to grow up."

He laughed again and gave my hair another jerk, and kissed Aunty, and then he was waving to us from the stern of the ferry; and I waved back, wishing that summer need not have come to an end, and wondering a little what Gregory's Boston and New York and Newport young-lady friends were like. Dazzling, undoubtedly. I knew what their idea of me would be. According to Gregory, all Westerners were presumed to be Red Indians, or miners with picks and shovels, or females who wore calico dresses and covered-wagon sunbonnets.

That night I sat at my dressing table and experimented with curling tongs and hairpins and scissors usurped from Aunty's room. The results were mortifying; Aunty sniffed a smell of scorching and rushed down the hall prepared to throw open my windows and cry, "Fire!"

When she saw what I was attempting, she exclaimed, horrified, that I looked a fright. "An absolute fright! There is no other word for it. Take those hairpins out at once, Lilas. I can't think what Gregory meant by putting such ideas in your head."

The next morning a note was sent off to the Misses Dolls on Sacramento Street asking that I be excused from my

morning lessons, and Aunty took me to her hairdresser to make me presentable, and her little girl again.

But Monsieur Louis had ideas of his own as well as scoldings to add to Aunty's. When he had trimmed the ragged singed bangs that were to have achieved a piquant Jersey Lily effect, he pulled my black straight hair off my face and coiled a heavy knot at my neck.

"Nevaire, nevaire, the curls or the frizz for you, *Mademoiselle*," he admonished me sternly. "A crime, such a thing! And always, those small ears must show."

He looked at Aunty inquiringly. "She will have jewels for them perhaps, soineday? She is a type, this *petite fille* of yours. She can be something—or nozzing, you understand?"

Aunty answered with severity that all she was interested in at the moment was to see my hair hanging down my back again with its black velvet bandeau replaced.

But somehow the morning ended with Monsieur Louis piercing my ears for those jewels of the future.

"I suppose you are right," Aunty conceded when he urged it. "The child will have to have it done eventually; it may as well be gotten over with."

Monsieur Louis heated a sharp needle over a gas flame. I jumped when it pricked. I didn't enjoy having lengths of waxed thread pulled through the tiny bloody holes. But the hurt was an exciting sort of hurt, and when a letter arrived from Gregory—addressed to me, not to Aunty—I promptly answered, describing it all.

When Christmas came, his holidays were too brief for another long train journey, but I found a present from him under the tree in the drawing room that Aunty had insisted be trimmed and candle-lighted.

Earrings. Dear little fringed gold balls. "*They aren't exactly jewels, but I wanted to send you your first pair,*" he had written on the card in their white box. "*I know Aunt Edith won't let you wear them yet, but if you like them, perhaps you can at least put them on when you go to bed, to help keep the holes in your ears open. I keep on feeling sorry that the piercing hurt. I don't like to think of anything hurting you.*"

When the tree candles were blown out and guests had gone home, and Aunty's lonely big house was dark and silent, the gold balls were in my ears, but it was Randall, not Gregory, I was thinking about.

A boy who didn't care how much anything hurt. Who wasn't sorry about anything.

And where was he? Where was he, this Christmas Night?
Oh, Ran! Ran! Lost Ran.

8

AT THE END of May Aunty and I crossed the continent for Commencement Day, and to say good-by to Gregory before he left on the year's tour of Europe that was Aunty's graduation present.

When he met us in the Boston station, we were dusty and sooty and rumpled, and pale with heat and exhaustion after seven stifling days and nights in the Pullman cars, and our cinder-filled eyes streamed; but Gregory kissed Aunty and hugged us both, and declared us the most welcome sight and the two most ravishing creatures he had seen since leaving California.

He took charge of our luggage and put us in a cab, and drove with us to the hotel, and when we had bathed and shampooed and changed into cool fresh dresses that had been unpacked and pressed for us, he joined us for the dinner Aunty ordered sent up to our suite.

He noticed at once that my hair was not hanging loose down my back, but was turned under and tied at the neck with a taffeta ribbon. "You are getting there!" He nodded approvingly.

"You are incorrigible, Gregory. All that nonsense about Lilas growing up, and then your birthday present. A fan for the child—an ostrich feather fan! Really, dear boy." Aunty was trying to scold, but she ended with a sigh. "If it's any satisfaction to you, I've decided Lilas may come out in the fall. Her friends are doing it, and people seem to expect it."

That was the real reason Aunty had given in. "People expect it." A debut was merely another layer of gloss she would carefully apply to the smooth concealing surface of our lives.

Gregory broke a tiny silence that may only have existed in my imagination. "I shall hate to miss your party, Lilas. You know that, don't you? I wish I could change my plans."

"Nonsense. Lilas wouldn't think of you giving up your trip—would you, child? No. Of course not. And neither would I. It's precisely why neither of us wrote you about the party."

"If my year were just sightseeing, a pleasure junket—" Gregory frowned uncertainly. "But I want it to be much more. I want to see all the big shipping firms and warehouse people. I want to see manufacturers. Spencer and Company needs to expand. It can't afford to stand still."

"Go on your trip and absorb all you can, dear boy. And whatever ideas you come back with, I shall see my board listens to them."

She was Aunty, her mind made up, determined to have

her way. Gregory smiled at me ruefully. "I am afraid it's Europe."

"A year is a long time," I said slowly. Even with being grownup at last, and a different Lilas than I had ever been, Aunty's house would still seem lonely and too big. "You'll be sure to come back? You won't forget us?"

"How could I, Lilas?" Gregory's dark eyes were full of surprise. "When you and Aunt Edith matter more to me than anything in my life?"

We saw him graduate cum laude. We said good-by when his steamer sailed for Hamburg, and then we started home. Every day on the train Aunty scribbled lists and jotted memorandums; my early November reception, my "season," was to be a triumph of elaborate planning.

When we got home, there were endless dressmaker appointments, and interviews with caterers and florists, and my bedroom was "done over" in the white dotted Swiss and pale blue silk suitable for the Lilas who was now a young lady, and Aunty gave me a silver brush and comb, and hand mirror, and buttonhook and shoehorn for my dressing table.

It poured rain when the day of the reception finally came, but a marquee, stretching from the carriage-block to the front door, took care of dripping umbrellas and wraps; and inside the house was what a society editor described as a miracle of "Spring in Winter" in the columns I clipped out to send Gregory. ". . . the Floral Arch under which Miss Spencer and her niece stood to receive their guests being worthy of particular mention, with its lavish and tasteful wreathing of smilax and asparagus fern interspersed with yellow roses. The hostess, a member of one of San Francisco's most distinguished families, is not only

greatly beloved by a large coterie of personal friends, but by many of us who know of her unfailing and generous response to any of our city's Church or Charity appeals. For the Presentation of her cousin Miss Spencer wore a demi-toilette of the heaviest gray surah silk with appliqués and bodice flounces of *point de venise*. The same handsome lace was worn by Miss Spencer some years ago in Paris when, as a guest at the United States Consulate, she was received by the then Empress Eugenié. Miss Spencer's gloves were mauve kid and she carried a small bouquet of heliotrope and Confederate violets. (Mention of the latter blooms may recall to some of our readers Miss Spencer's Virginian connections on the maternal side.) And apropos of flowers, the lovely Bud herself carried a nosegay of more yellow roses, a shade deeper in hue than the deliciously floating, diaphanous Philippine gauze, over *moiré*, of her enchanting frock. Although there were a preponderance of intimates from former South Park and Rincon Hill days noted among the many guests, and a large contingent representing our still earlier, extremely exclusive, Spanish set, the elite of 'New San Francisco' were also much in evidence. The military, too, held its own, a number of gallant officers from Fort Point being present. And not to be omitted were the British, Chinese, and Peruvian consulate group, lending a cosmopolitan touch to the delightful affair that was shadowed only by the much-regretted absence of the two handsome, brilliant young scions of the family.

"Mr. Gregory Spencer is in Europe on a Grand Tour following his graduation, cum laude, from Harvard in June, and Mr. Randall Spencer, whose keen interest in the Orient has kept him away for the past several years, is pursuing his career in China."

Oh, Aunty, Aunty!

For days after I read that last paragraph Randall, who couldn't come to my party because of his "career," was in the hall again and on the stairs. Not a boy who was a coward and a liar and who had hurt us unforgivably by his unrepentant, cruel silence, but a boy wading in sea water or running in the wind or holding out a moon-stone.

He could still bring me perilously close to tears. I had to keep telling myself it would be babyish, it would be stupid, to cry. Randall did not deserve anyone's tears. Besides, when was there time to cry? And how could I go to lunch parties and teas and dinners and balls with red swollen eyes?

It was not too difficult to make myself enjoy the winter. I went to the theater and to musicales with pleasant enough young men who also seemed to enjoy calling on me and sending flowers and ribbon-tied boxes of candy. I was in demand to take part in drawing-room charades and to pose for *tableaux vivants*. At dancing parties my programs filled up quickly enough, so that Aunty, in a chair along the wall with the other chaperones, had the comfortable assurance I was a success.

Several of the young men wanted to marry me. I wrote Gregory about them, and he answered, saying he hoped Aunty had her eye out for fortune hunters and that I wouldn't make a choice my first winter.

I wrote again: "*Aunty is a dragon, so you need not worry, and besides, I haven't any intention of choosing a husband. I don't think I shall ever marry.*"

Gregory's letters arrived as regularly as they had from Cambridge. Sometimes they were postmarked London or Glasgow, and were filled with descriptions of West Riding

woolen mills, or collieries, or Clyde shipyards and the iron-hulled cargo vessels that slid down the ways. Letters from Marseilles and Lyons and Milan meant Gregory was studying the silk industry. Letters from Germany spoke of his interest in porcelain factories.

I tore open his letters eagerly when they arrived, but also hurriedly. Sometimes they went into my muff, half read, when I rushed out of the house, late for an engagement. I would feel guilty and put them by my bed to read the last thing at night, but I was caught up in too much of a whirl to really miss him.

As his year drew to a close, Aunty unselfishly urged him to stay on as long as he liked. "*You are kind beyond words, dear Aunt Edith,*" he answered, "*but after a good deal of thought I have decided it is to my best interest, both now and for the future, for me to return as promptly as possible to the truly magnificent opportunities that await me in San Francisco.*"

He came home from Europe the beginning of my second winter "out." Immediately he plunged into strenuous days at Spencer and Company. He was at the office by eight every morning, or at the wharves even earlier. But he somehow managed to keep late hours for most of the parties. If I accepted for them, he accepted. At balls or small house-dances his initials were on my program at least twice in the evening. Now and then when I waltzed or polkaed with my other partners, I saw him watching me from a doorway or stairs. "He wants to make certain I am having a good time," I told myself, touched. "And he will rescue me if any silly young man insists that we sit too long in the conservatory."

He very often sent me flowers, but on Valentine's Day

his box of roses held a pair of gold and mother-of-pearl opera glasses.

They delighted me. I flew to the front door to meet him when he came home that evening from the office. "Thank you, thank you, Greg—the most lovely, beautiful Valentine present! And I'm so glad you are only a cousin. Aunty says I would have to return them if any other man had sent them. Any—any suitor."

"I'm happy they pleased you, Lilas. And your cataloguing interests me. It gives me something to think about."

He went upstairs, and I was left in the hall, feeling gauche, a little childish, and not at all certain what he meant.

With the end of April the big, important parties were over, and by summer all Aunty's and my friends had scattered to resorts or their country houses. Aunty chose a hot-springs hotel because of the rheumatism that had begun to trouble her; and Gregory drove up to join us on weekends.

Then it was autumn again, and the merry-go-round of entertaining, and being entertained, of theaters and concerts and charity balls and benefit bazaars, began again.

I still had my fair share of gaiety and attention.

One Sunday afternoon when Aunty had gone up to nap after our middle-of-the-day dinner and I was in the drawing room at the piano, Gregory came in and sat down. After a few minutes I was conscious of his eyes on me.

"Why are you staring? Don't you like my dress? It's new, and the latest thing out."

"I like it very much. Your clothes are always charming."

"But you look so serious."

"Do I? I was merely wondering if you will ever fall in love."

"What on earth made you think of that?" I swiveled the piano stool to stare, surprised.

"It's a subject that has interested me for some time. You have given their congé to any number of unhappy admirers these past two winters. Why, Lilas? Most of them have been extremely eligible."

"Why?"

"Yes, why? Is it because you have set up some sort of criterion?"

"No, it's not that."

"The grand passion, so called, simply doesn't interest you?"

"I think about men, Greg, I think about being married. Every girl does, I suppose, but . . ." I fingered the pages of my music album and hesitated, trying to make what I wanted to say clear, even to myself. "The thing is, when it comes to choosing, you look about, and . . . and you are in an empty room . . . even though it's crowded. If ever the right person had been in it, he has gone—you've missed him. I can't explain. Not really. That's the nearest . . ."

"Perhaps it is not so much that he has gone, Lilas. Perhaps he hasn't yet come in."

"Perhaps." I hoped it was that way. Other girls fell in love with no difficulty at all. I had been a bridesmaid over and over.

"What about you, Greg?" I asked lightly. "Why don't you get yourself madly, madly involved?"

"I have. And some time ago, as a matter of fact, though I'm not yet certain whether or not it will come to anything."

"Oh? The girl doesn't care for you? But she must! How could she help it?"

"She does care in a way. I'm not entirely without hope. But I shan't ask her to marry me just yet. It's wiser to play a waiting game. If I rush her, I could lose her altogether."

"But Greg! Someone else might come along."

"It's a fairly calculable risk. There's no immediate danger, it appears."

His thin dark face was expressionless. His eyes told me nothing. I began to play the piano again, wondering who the girl was and thinking her a fool. I felt sorry for Gregory, and a little sorry for myself. On a quiet afternoon such as this, Aunty's house was not only empty-feeling, even with Gregory home, but depressing, in an odd, indefinable way.

Everything in it so heavy and pressing-down. None of us entirely happy. Each with concealments.

The fortunate, envied Spencers of Nob Hill.

I was ashamed of my ridiculous, morbid mood. I made my fingers fly in a lively mazurka.

Later, callers would drop in, as they always did on Sundays. Among them would be the "admirers" I had kept as friends in spite of not wanting any of them for a husband. Tea, then, and fruitcake, and glasses of port. The lamps lighted. A fire in the grate. Chatter and laughter.

In January Gregory went abroad again. At his insistence Spencer and Company, Ltd., was making a strong bid for British and European trade. "Not just the Orient, but the world," was Gregory's creed.

Before he left, he had coaxed Aunty into taking me to Europe, too. She and I and Nellie would go in the spring, when he had completed another tour of shipping centers and factories. "We'll have a few days in London, and then

I'll take three weeks' holiday with you in Italy," he promised. "Let's make it Bellagio, on Lake Como. It's the most beautiful spot imaginable."

I missed him when he had gone, more than I had ever missed him before. He wrote often to Aunty, with his usual affectionate consideration, but letters to me came less frequently than I had expected. I reminded myself he now had some one else to write—at least I supposed he did. He hadn't volunteered anything more since that Sunday afternoon in the drawing room, and I had not asked.

Aunty was tremendously excited at the thought of the trip. She forgot her rheumatism. She forgot that my gay succession of winters had tired her. She forgot she was getting old.

The entire venture might have been of her own planning. On the day we finally left, she sat very straight and authoritatively in the carriage, a mole tippet crossed at the neck of her black broadcloth traveling costume, a new black straw bonnet tipped a little forward—modishly, but with no slightest suggestion of unladylike extremeness—on her carefully curled and netted gray fringe.

She had refused to entrust either our tickets or funds to my charge. "You are certain to lose them, child." And so the tickets were in her own firmly clutched handbag, together with a bottle of smelling salts, an eau-de-cologned handkerchief, a letter of credit to banks in every city in Europe, and a small jet-beaded pouch full of "change."

A slightly thickened look to her waistline was caused by the strappings and pinnings and bucklings of a money belt she had personally designed and instructed our seamstress to evolve from the heaviest of twills, the most elaborate of elastic inserts, and yards and yards of tape.

It was the same chilly-fingered, patient seamstress who had once made me a brown linen play dress to wear at the cove, and corduroy knickers and jackets for Gregory and Randall. For no reason at all I remembered that as we got to the ferry and porters swarmed for our valises. Or perhaps there was a reason. When I had gone to the attic to select the huge handsome Spencer trunks we wanted brought down, I caught a glimpse of an alien trunk, thrust away under the eaves. Randall's. Little. Cardboardish. Pathetic. The trunk that had arrived with him the first day I ever saw him.

Sixteen days later, while our steamer was made fast at her Southhampton berth, I pushed close to the rail, ruthlessly elbowing a place for myself, and searched for sight of Gregory. And then I waved and waved my handkerchief as he waved the hat he had snatched from his dark head.

I was smiling, but my eyes were suddenly, absurdly wet.
Greg. Dear Greg.

33 9

HE HAD ARRANGED a little gala dinner for us that evening in our Mayfair hotel and booked stalls at Covent Garden for a performance of *Rigoletto*.

Nellie unpacked in a frenzy. Aunty had a hairdresser rushed up to her room. "Put on that cream satin of yours, child, and your mother's pearls," she commanded. "This is London. And we not only want to be grand, we want Gregory to be proud of us."

I had already considered the satin.

At dinner, Gregory, sitting between us, raised his glass when the wine was poured. "To incomparable Aunt Edith, and to Lilas—beautiful Lilas."

His eyes smiled into mine. A quick, sweet excitement stirred me.

At the opera there were the crowds, the gowns and jewels, and royalty to stare at in its garlanded gold and

scarlet box, but when the lights were lowered, I gave myself up to the music. The lovely, lovely music. And while I listened, enraptured, Gregory's gloved hand reached out to hold mine, under my libretto and the feather fan he had given me. I didn't draw it away. With our hands linked, the music belonged to us both, flowed between us, all the more lovely for the sharing.

After the opera Gregory took us to a restaurant, very beau monde, very elegant. When our champagne supper was over and we came out on the sidewalk, cockney flower girls were crying their violets, and Gregory bought Aunty and me each a dark purple bunch, just off the market carts lumbering in from Kew, and still moist and heavy-headed with country dew.

He helped pin Aunty's to her cloak because she was all thumbs trying to do it herself, and then he pinned mine, and I couldn't look at him. My lashes were on my quickly flushing cheeks. He was too near. Too close.

London, as we drove back to our hotel in a hansom, was an etching; inked river, inked stone, inked squares, and trees. All of that. The whole beautiful and yet disturbing evening to think about as I got ready for bed, with my dress flung, crumpled, on a chair, my violets put carefully in water.

Gregory, reaching for my hand.

For hours I had burned with an astonishing jealousy for a girl I didn't know, a girl I had never seen—a disinterested fool of a girl. And for the first time in my life I had thought of Gregory as some one other than a cousin.

Away from Aunty's house, a continent and an ocean away, detached from all that our childhood had been, remote from the pangs, the ashamed and shaming concealments, of my growing up years, he was suddenly a stranger

I had met for the first time. A Spencer, yes, with that proud way of holding his head, the black hair, the straight, haughty nose—but a stranger nonetheless. Fascinating. Magnetic. Some one I had waited for and who, from nowhere, unheralded, had walked into a crowded and yet empty room.

And it was "Lilas" he had drunk to, not "Cousin Lilas."

I hugged the recollection to myself, treasuring it, until I fell asleep.

The next day, and the next, in London, and on the boat to Ostend, and in all the *wagon-lits* and carriages and fiacres and charabancs that brought us at last to the Lake of Como, I asked myself, "Who am I, in Gregory's eyes? Whom does he see, looking at me? Have I, too, miraculously become a stranger?"

On a warm April afternoon we arrived at Bellagio in an omnibus that had jolted and swayed for miles along the narrowest of winding hillside roads, powdery with dust, baked with sun, whose abrupt curves were blocked as frequently as not by panniered donkeys or slowly plodding yoked white oxen.

When we reached our hotel and our big, cool high-ceilinged rooms, Aunty announced she intended to take a bath and a rest. "And I shan't bother to come down to dinner this evening. I shall have a tray while Nellie unpacks, and then I shall go to bed. And don't begin imagining things, you two. I am not in the least overtired, and there is not a thing in the world the matter with me except my joints." She winced as she pulled the gloves off her swollen fingers. "Now run along, children; I want to get into my bath. And Gregory, why don't you take Lilas for a nice little walk or a row on the lake? I have been told the sunsets here are delightful."

Aunty put it as though the color effects had been expressly provided by the hotel keeper, along with a famous cuisine, for his guests' enjoyment, and Gregory laughed. He found Aunty highly entertaining. It had amused him hugely as we traveled to see her prove herself the same loving despot we had known as children. Aunty, who had always been right, and who had decided what we should wear, where we should go, with whom we should play, was Aunty deciding which bottled water was safest to drink, which picture gallery was worth tired feet, and now was determined "the children" shouldn't miss a really worthwhile feature of Bellagio.

"What do you think of Aunt Edith's suggestion, Lilas?"

I laughed, too. "I wouldn't dream of trying to argue." It was fun, having a little private joke between us that we both so completely understood and appreciated.

When I had changed from my traveling clothes into a thin white muslin, I joined Gregory in the hotel lounge and we strolled outside toward the incredibly blue water that lay at the foot of a garden shaded by fig trees and olives.

Where the lake lapped at a short flight of lichen-streaked marble steps, a cluster of little boats bobbed, tied to a float canopied with pink-and-white-striped canvas. Gregory bargained with the boy in charge of them, and seated me in a skiff with *Andante* painted on its stern. Sitting opposite me, he dipped oars into quiet water that reflected a sky flushed with carnation, streaked with gold, brilliant as the Royal Box in London.

Slowly, as Gregory dipped and lifted his oars and I trailed a hand in the water, the sky paled and the first stars came out. With dusk, Gregory turned our little boat and rowed back to the lantern-hung float. The hotel was

lighted. From its terraces the strains of an accordian drifted to us, and singing.

"It's all so breath-taking, Greg. A paradise!"

"It could be, Lilas. It's what I hoped when I suggested Bellagio. From my point of view it is still on trial."

Cryptic or translatable? I could make of it what I chose.

The evening was only the first of any number we spent drifting on the lake. And there were days and days on donkey-cart drives into the hills, where we picnicked in vineyards and olive groves or strolled in the deserted, melancholy gardens of old crumbling villas with their marble satyrs and Dianas, their broken fountains and overgrown myrtles.

Before long we were seeing Aunty only at teatime on the hotel terrace; she felt the Italian heat more than she cared to admit, and she ate too many elaborate dishes, all sauces and olive oil, and too many pastries. But she would not hear of us giving up any of our excursions to stay with her, or of us dining with her in her room. "Run along and enjoy yourselves, children," she insisted. "And don't fuss over me simply because I'm a little under the weather. I won't have it. You hear? I won't have it."

And so we were alone for most of those days and evenings, with their langorous, beguiling hours. I was blissfully content. Spellbound. Certain, beyond any faintest doubt, what Gregory meant to me.

"*Caro nome che il mio cor . . .* Dear name, my heart enshrines. . . ." I had listened to it pour out in *Rigoletto*. I caught myself softly singing it.

The evening we became engaged, we had wandered through the hotel gardens to a bench by the water. "Look at me, Lilas." Gregory tilted my chin, made me raise my eyes to meet his. "Can you guess what I am going to ask

you? I've wanted you so long. It wasn't easy, waiting for you to grow up. Even then you weren't ready. Oh, my beautiful, blind darling, don't you understand? There was never anyone else. Never! I've tried to be patient. I've kept hoping, kept thinking of ways to waken you. And now, Lilas, now at last! Will you marry me? Will you say you love me?"

"I love you, Greg." As I whispered it, his arms went around me, his lips were on mine.

Two people who had met as strangers. Two people who had found each other. It had come true for Gregory as well as for me.

Hand in hand we went in to tell Aunty. She hugged us delightedly and declared she had known it would happen all the time, and in five minutes had planned our wedding. "A big, lovely wedding," she insisted. "I won't take no. You in your mother's dress and veil, Lilas. And after the church, a reception. White chrysanthemums if it's to be in the fall, and of course it couldn't be any sooner."

We decided on the first of October for our marriage. It was the latest possible date Gregory would listen to, the first, the very first moment, Aunty declared, that a trousseau could be ready and arrangements completed for an occasion twice as important as my debut had been. Her eyes filled when she kissed us good night. "My two good, dear, blessed children. I suppose I'm a foolish, sentimental old woman, making a spectacle of myself, but I can't help it. It's so wonderful. So right! And it makes up for—for almost everything."

We left Bellagio after a flurry of packing and hurried to Paris, where Aunty bought everything she saw in the shops and ordered what she didn't see: Monogrammed napkins and tablecloths, and sheets and pillow slips. Sets

and sets of tucked, lacy underthings. I stood for hours in fitting rooms. I tried on a hundred hats.

Sometimes Gregory came to the dressmakers' to help me make a choice or give his approval. "I shall be so proud of you, Lilas," he told me over and over. "So terribly proud of my wife."

He left Aunty and me in Paris for a week alone, and went to Glasgow on Spencer and Company business, and then we joined him in London, and when he had seen tailors and bootmakers and gone to an auction or two, we sailed for home with Aunty much pleased to have twice caught a glimpse of the Queen driving along the Mall in her coach, but regretting that two men on the box of a San Francisco equipage might, just possibly, be considered ostentatious.

The moment we reached San Francisco, she plunged into wedding preparations. I couldn't persuade her to let us have a small quiet affair rather than the huge fashionable event on which her heart was set. She wouldn't listen, either, when I begged her not to overtire herself.

Two weeks later she had a stroke. Not a serious one; in fact, it was relatively light. Kind old Dr. Mason, our physician and close family friend, quickly reassured Gregory and me, but undoubtedly it was the forerunner of future attacks that would prove progressively more severe.

Aunty refused to admit to anything more than what she termed a "nasty splitting headache," and she was adamant about giving up her cherished wedding plans. Dr. Mason advised me to let her have her way. Gregory agreed with him. "It would break her heart, darling, if we crossed her in this. And if it gives her any pleasure, why not humor her? We might not have her with us too long, remember. But we won't think of that." Because he wanted

me to look less unhappy about Aunty, he added, laughing, "We will only think about all the people who would feel cheated if we had a quiet wedding. We are the Spencers, don't forget, and they enjoy seeing us live up to it. Besides"—he drew me close and kissed me—"besides, I want to show you off. I'd like everyone in the world to be looking at you."

He did want to show me off. He meant it. How well I knew him.

"What a boy you are, still! The Gregory bringing home bits for a cabinet and insisting each time that everyone stare and admire—because it was yours. And oh, Greg—" my teasing melted into a tremulous sigh—"I *am* yours, and I do love you so much."

The last week in September came and went, with Aunty still confined to her bed, furious that she hadn't the strength to get out of it, and must miss our wedding.

We were married in Trinity Church at five o'clock in the afternoon of a bright day free of fog, with the indigo bay ruffled into whitecaps by the same breeze that blew my mother's lace and illusion veil about as I got out of Aunty's carriage, escorted by Dr. Mason, whom I had asked to give me away.

I remember candlelight and music, and looking up at Gregory. I remember each of us repeating, ". . . till death do us part," and thinking, Death is only for other people. Not for us.

Then we were back in Aunty's house, with guests crowding to shake hands or kiss us, and unbelieving, I told myself, "It is true. You are married. You are carrying a bouquet of orange blossoms. Gregory put a gold ring on your finger. You are his wife. You belong to him. And when the caterer's terrapin and oysters have been eaten

and the tall white cake with the doves on top has been cut, we shall be going off together."

Champagne glasses brimmed. The string quartet under the conservatory palms played louder to make itself heard above laughter and toasts, the clink of plates and silverware. Eventually we pushed through the guests and the hurrying, harassed-looking waiters, and ran upstairs, with my satin and lace trailing behind us, to change into our going-away clothes.

For a last time I was dressing in the bedroom of my childhood, the bedroom of my girlhood. Nellie helped me change my stockings and slippers, and fastened the *soutache*-braid frogs of my fawn-colored broadcloth *tailleur*. She pinned on the froth of my matching tulle toque, buttoned my creamy suede gloves, and put around my shoulders a beaver capelet which, with a muff, had been Aunty's final Paris extravagance.

Gregory was waiting for me at Aunty's door, and with his arm around me, we went in to say good-by. She was propped high on her pillows, wearing her best mauve bed-jacket and diamond crescent. She hadn't the least intention of letting us go until we answered all her questions in detail and gave her a complete accounting of our wedding.

Gregory was dear and patient, and made a little joke by saying she was Grande Dame Gourmand, instead of Grande Dame Gourmet, when she boasted of having eaten both oysters and terrapin, a slice of bridecake, a martron mousse in a macaroon shell, and drunk a glass of champagne—all of which had been brought up to her on a tray wreathed with smilax and stephanotis.

When he had given me a meaningful nod toward the door, he kissed Aunty and told her he was the happiest man

in the world—"I'm on a mountaintop, Aunt Edith!"—but he would be even happier once he had his bride to himself. And so would she forgive us for taking our leave? And why not just lie back now and enjoy a catnap until she was ready to ring for Nellie and be made comfortable for the night? He kissed her again lightly, and then I gave Aunty a quick hard hug. There was a lump in my throat, and I felt a contrite pang at the thought of leaving her with only the servants, in a house so much too big, so lonely for her, while Gregory and I were gone. But it would be only for a week. Gregory had bought two new ships that soon would be sailing for England loaded with wheat and barley, to return with cargoes of steel and iron and cement, and nothing could have induced either of us to miss the proud day of their departure flying Spencer and Company's blue-and-red pennants from their main-masts.

The week away would be over before Aunty knew it. And then Gregory and I were coming back to live with her. It was what Gregory and I both wanted to do. Not that I didn't secretly wish for a house of our own in spite of my new-found perfect joy. Aunty's house was still not—not a house that was open.

But it was time my attitude changed. I had been ashamed of morbidity once before. I was ashamed again. And how could Gregory and I possibly abandon Aunty?

Not now. As I hugged Aunty, I was glad Dr. Mason had promised to drop in every day of our absence. She looked exhausted from all the questions she had been asking.

And now all at once, why was she peering at me so oddly? And what was she saying?

"Just let me think. Let me think. It is you, isn't it, Lilas?"

"Why, yes, of course, Aunty."

For a startled moment I wondered if the champagne was making her ask such a queer question. And then I knew by Gregory's expression what was wrong. This was what Dr. Mason had meant by hinting gently that we must be prepared if Aunty should now and again lapse into cloudy-mindedness.

"So it is. So it is. I knew who you were all the time. But you look so grown up. Has Aunty seen you in that dress before? And is that Gregory you are going off with, or is it . . . But it couldn't be, could it, because . . ." Whatever she had meant to say trailed off in a yawn. "I'm sleepy. So run along dears, and have a nice time. It's to be a birthday party, isn't it? But how silly of me. It's not a birthday party at all—it's a wedding. Things seem to get so jumbled. Don't ever grow old, children. Take my word, it's the greatest mistake." Again she yawned, and her eyelids dropped. I thought she had fallen asleep, but as Gregory and I started to move quietly away from the bed, she clutched at my hand. "I'm glad we bought those nice French gloves for you, Lilas. Good gloves make all the difference in the world to one's appearance, as I've always told you." She was entirely herself as she said it, and she was Aunty when she commanded briskly, "When you go downstairs, kindly ask them in the pantry to save some of the wedding cake for tomorrow. I shall want a piece for my lunch. A big piece."

She was dozing, with the anticipatory smile of a greedy child on her lips, when we softly closed the door behind us.

I forgot all about her, no one existed for me but Gregory once we were in the carriage and Wrenn was driving us to the Palace. We would spend our wedding night there,

and then, the next day, drive to the Los Altos foothills and the country house offered us by Dr. Mason's sister. Pink stucco Villa Firenze, surrounded by vineyards, would be Italy again, but a private, very special Italy, for two people who had met as strangers, but now, having found each other, were miraculously one.

All the days of the short, sweet week that followed were perfect. Each was idyllic. We strolled in a terraced garden of formal lawns and flower beds and grottos and statuary. We picnicked on bread and cheese among acres of vines, their saffron and rust-red leaves crimped by early-morning frosts, their grapes hanging heavy and swollen to bursting by noon heat that was a smoky blue haze veiling the summer-dry hills. When we drank wine from the wooden casks of a cool stone winery, Gregory kissed my throat and said that the wine showed, as it showed when white-throated Mary Queen of Scots drank. And when evening came and we went to our bedroom and Gregory opened the latticed windows onto their grilled balcony, I remembered the music of a Covent Garden Opera. Not the "*caro nome*" I had sung to myself in Bellagio, but "*E il sol dell'anima, la vita e amore . . .* Love is the sun by which passion is kindled."

It was a wrench to leave Villa Firenze when our enchanted week had spun itself out.

I turned to look back as we drove away.

"You are a little sad, Lilas? Don't be, my darling. Nothing is over. It is all just beginning. It is all ahead."

Gregory was right. We were the young, fortunate, newly-married Spencers, going back to Nob Hill to start their life together as husband and wife.

"You weren't too lonely?" we asked Aunty anxiously when we came back.

"I'm never lonely," she assured us brightly. "That's the nice part of having children grow up in one's house. There is always so much to think about, so much to remember."

When Gregory and I had dined, we went upstairs to "the best guest room," which had been opened and aired for us. Our room now. As children we had only stood on the threshold to look in, a little overcome with its splendors.

The lamps were lighted and a welcoming fire burned in the grate. And there were flowers. Not just the crimson wax roses in the pair of alabaster hands on the mantel, but white stock and white Cape jasmine, in profusion, everywhere.

"Oh, lovely!" I exclaimed ecstatically, "Lovely, lovely!"

Gregory looked pleased. "I hoped you would like them. I only wished when I ordered them that lilacs were in season. White lilacs. Lilacs for Lilas—my very beautiful Lilas."

I ran to the table by the bed and buried my face in a cool-petaled, fragrant bouquet. My wedding-day camellias and orange blossoms had been the conventional accessories to a bride's lace and satin. These flowers were different. Their giving, for the sweet garnishment of our bedroom, was different. Infinitely tender. Infinitely endearing. The very essence of Gregory's never-failing thoughtfulness and perception. "Make me a good wife," I begged the flowers in a private whisper that welled from my heart. "Let me make my husband as happy as he has made me."

I fell asleep blissfully, peacefully, that night, next to Gregory in the big brass bed with the crimson velvet canopy and curtains that had impressed us so as children. But just at daylight I suddenly stirred and wakened from a fantastic dream, half tormenting, half rapturous. My eyes

flew open. Had someone called out a name? Or had I heard only the sough of a dawn wind swaying the dark, sinuous boughs and the elongated, twisting leaves of the eucalyptus trees outside the bedroom windows? A wind with the sound of the sea to it, I fancied, and the boughs and the leaves could have been masses of kelp, wave-tossed.

I started up in bed, and then with quick realization I missed Gregory from beside me. My sleep-filled eyes found him, standing by a window, staring out at the bay.

"Gregory?" I thought, when I spoke, still only half awake, he would smile, and come back to bed, last night's eager, demanding bridegroom. My hair was loose on the pillows. Gregory had freed it from the knot at the nape of my neck. My nightdress was off my shoulders.

When he didn't speak, I put my question again. "Gregory?" For no reason at all my voice sounded unsure. "What are you doing, darling, standing there?"

He turned slowly. "So long as you've asked, I'll confess: I was God-damning an intruder. Not that it's the first time." He said it quietly. The smile I had waited for was quick, erasing any hurt in his eyes almost before I could glimpse it. And he came back to bed. But I knew what I had done to him. I knew I had not imagined a called-out name. It had escaped my own lips—an utterance from my dream, both transporting and odious, that was to come back again and again. And always, like the soughing of the wind in the trees outside our bedroom windows, the toss and sway of boughs and leaves, it would speak of the sea, the sea. . . .

๑๑ 10

AUNTY NEVER really recovered her health. There were days when she came downstairs, leaning on her cane and Nellie's arm, for short drives or a cup of tea in the drawing room, and very occasionally she took dinner with Gregory and me. But more and more often we noticed she resigned herself to staying in bed for a week—two weeks—at a time.

Her increasing childishness was far sadder to see than any physical weakness. She became forgetful. Her conversation had a disconcerting way of wandering, of going off at a tangent. Few people, few events, had a fixed, clear place in her mind any more. And she knew it. Often when I came up from the drawing room to sit with her after dinner, which I did as frequently as I could without making Gregory feel neglected, she confided worriedly, "This was one of my bad days again, child. I'm glad it's over. I wish I didn't get so tired--so confused."

"Confused, Aunty? What about?" I always asked it as

quietly and matter of factly as possible, but as I looked up from my needlework I felt a chill as I waited for her impatient answer that was invariably, mystifyingly the same.

"About what happened, Lilas." And then she would ask hopefully, "Do I sleep a great deal, even in the daytime? Could it be just a dream?"

"You nap, yes, Aunty. Dr. Mason says naps are good for you. And of course you dream. Everyone dreams."

She would look around her, with greatest caution, and drop her voice as though making certain we were alone and could not be overheard. "But the same dream, coming back? And such a bad dream. Such a really dreadful dream. It *is* a dream, isn't it, Lilas?"

"You know it *is*, Aunty." It was what she wanted to hear. Her old, troubled eyes pleaded for it pathetically, and though I hadn't the slightest idea what was bothering her, I would reach out quickly and pat her hand, and lightly, affectionately, scold her. Sometimes she took my word for it and would go on sopping up spoonfuls of Sang's fresh bread that she loved to float in hot milk the last thing at night. Other times an unshakable horror gripped her. "It's not a dream! I know it's not a dream. You are saying it to fool Aunty. But it's true—only—only I can't quite remember." And in her distress she would struggle painfully to raise herself higher against her pillows while she whimpered piteously that Lilas was naughty and unkind to tell fibs. After a little she could smile at me weakly, but with perfect clarity, her horror gone and forgotten. She would reach for the Bible on the table next to her bed, and her swollen, clumsy fingers would fumble through it for the page she wanted; and I would tiptoe out of the room, leaving her with her night light and her little silver bell, and with her door ajar.

More often than not she asked for Gregory before I left her. And Gregory would leave his desk, or his curio cabinet, or his chair and book, and whisky and soda, to put a hand on her shoulder. "Go to sleep, Aunt Edith." Just those few words contented her utterly. Gregory was so good, so good. Always on those especially difficult nights he waited by her bed until her eyes closed. I could never bring myself to ask her to tell me her dream in detail, and neither could Gregory, who was as distressed for Aunty as I. "The less importance she thinks we attach to it, the better, darling," he cautioned me. "She is almost certain to forget it if we ignore the whole thing. Dr. Mason says old, ill people often go through these queer, frightening phases. I know how you hate to see Aunt Edith like this, and so do I, but it's just something we shall have to accept."

I knew Gregory was right, and I did my best not to let Aunty's vagueness, her ramblings, affect me too much, but to see age and illness imposed so cruelly on someone I loved as I loved Aunty was a constant strain. But I had Gregory to help me bear the load. Aunty's room became a room set apart from the rest of the house, and when we said good night to her each evening, we had a beautiful, sane kingdom of our own to share.

We had been married almost a year and four months the day the *Star of China* sailed into port with Randall aboard as her captain.

The evening after the ball at the Palace Hotel, Gregory and I went into Aunty's drawing room when we finished dinner and Gregory poured crème de menthe for me and brandy for himself.

I took the glass he offered, but my hand shook, and I put it down before the greenness could spill, and stretched my hands to the fire. I had been cold all day.

"How dare he come back, Gregory?" It burst from me involuntarily. "How could he, after treating Aunty so abominably? All these years with not a word. He must have known she would be old. Must have known he would hurt her, stirring it up again."

"Did he ever consider Aunt Edith, or anyone else, for that matter, but himself? Then why should he now?" Gregory swirled the brandy in his glass. "Whatever his reason for coming home, I don't doubt he has complete confidence he can placate Aunt Edith. Get around her. He always could."

"I keep thinking about Wrenn."

We were alone, and the door to the dining room was closed while Norah and Lew cleared the table, but I lowered my voice to a whisper.

"Put him out of your mind, darling."

"How can I? You seem so certain he won't make trouble. I wish I were."

"Perhaps I understand him better than you." Gregory laughed shortly. "Why should he take a horsewhip to Randall at this late date, and risk bringing everything out into the open? As I told you before, he's no fool, Lilas. His one concern is to keep a steady, pleasant flow of money coming his way."

"Does he get a great deal?"

"Enough. He is something of a bargainer. Incidentally, you and I will have to keep our purses open when Aunt Edith is gone, I'm afraid."

"The money is nothing, Greg, so long as it keeps him satisfied."

"I quite agree."

"Give him anything he asks for! You didn't see him that night, on the stairs with his whip. You didn't see his face

when he tried to push past Aunty. He was going to kill Ran."

"I'm not entirely unenlightened about his temperament, Lilas."

"If he had been drunk, Greg, really drunk, Aunty couldn't have stopped him. Not Aunty, nor anyone. And if ever he lost hold of himself . . ."

To me, Wrenn was in the hall again, his whip raised to lash and cut. And I was a young girl, crouched in my nightdress, hidden at the top of the stairs, staring down and listening, with my heart hammering.

Aunty had chosen to overlook Wrenn's tippling. Everyone's coachman "took a drop" occasionally against the chill of damp fog and bleak wind on long afternoons or evenings spent waiting endlessly, pulled up to a curb. That was her easy, comfortable excuse. Or it had been at first. Later, after Rosie's death, when he began to drink harder, the excuse was no longer valid. But she couldn't dismiss him. Wrenn was staying.

"He won't stand for it if he thinks there is a chance of Aunty forgiving Randall. And he will, if Randall keeps coming to see her."

"Coming to see you, darling," Gregory corrected me with a grave smile. "Coming to see my wife, whom he finds irresistible, it seems—as I find her."

His quiet, direct glance was difficult to meet. "Greg! No! It's Aunty."

"Modest, innocent Lilas. Adored Lilas. Don't you know that Randall has come back loving you as much as I do—in hi. own kind of way? It's fairly obvious if one happens to have a jealous streak." The smile disappeared. Gregory's mouth hardened. "Personally, I find it hell having him back, hell having to put up with him."

"Why must we? I detest him! I won't have him coming back to——"

"To call on Aunt Edith?"

"Don't, Greg. And please, please get rid of him. And get rid of Wrenn. They both terrify me. Please." I implored him vehemently, unsteadily. "Tell Wrenn we are finished with blackmail. Gossip can't hurt Aunty now. We could easily keep it from her. And why should there be gossip? How would anyone know about Rosie? Wrenn wouldn't dare tell. He would be telling on himself."

"You are asking the impossible, Lilas. I can't get rid of Wrenn."

"But why, Gregory? I don't see why?"

"He's much more of an Old Man of the Sea than you realize. You'll have to take my word for it. But you yourself said he could be dangerous if he forgot himself; do you think for a minute a man as fond of a bottle as Wrenn can be trusted to keep guard on his tongue? One loose word let slip, and where would we be? We are walking a tight-rope, Lilas, you and I—Mr. and Mrs. Gregory Spencer, who have known for eight years about a certain early morning carriage drive into the country. You'll agree that's the last bird we want let out of the cage? But as for those damnable finches upstairs, with their eternal twitter . . ."

Aunty's birds were chirping and trilling their sweet, shrill good night song. "Ring for Nellie to cover them," Gregory commanded annoyedly.

I reached for the bellpull without comment, but Gregory saw the surprise in my eyes. "Never mind," he said quickly. "Let Aunt Edith enjoy the racket. She has few enough pleasures, and not much time left even for those, I'm afraid." He got up and stirred the fire, looking sorry

for his irritability. "Was Dr. Mason here today? Did he have anything to say?"

"He came this morning. There is nothing new. It could be tomorrow or in six months or——"

"Or a year from now, I don't doubt."

Suddenly Gregory took me in his arms. "Let's forget death, Lilas." He kissed me passionately, and I clung to him and returned his kisses, and I needed no persuasion when he whispered, "Shall we go upstairs?"

CHAPTER 11

IT WAS the next morning, soon after breakfast, that the front doorbell rang and Norah came up to my room with a note. "A sailor fellow handed it in, ma'am. He says he's to wait for an answer."

I tore open the envelope. "*My dear Lilas,*" I read. "*May I reciprocate your charming hospitality in some small way by asking you to tea aboard the Star on Wednesday afternoon at four o'clock? The Star is berthed at Pier 10, at the foot of Battery and Front, as I believe I told Gregory. Gregory is, of course, included in my invitation, and there will be port or sherry for him if he prefers it to tea and hardtack out of the same old canister we used to dip into. Doubtless however, he would still find an hour spent aboard the Star as tedious as in the old days. Yours, Randall.*"

I read the note over twice before I thought of Norah,

standing in the doorway. "Take the man to the kitchen and see he has coffee," I told her. I did not want her round Irish eyes on me as I sat down at my desk. There was, of course, only one reply to make. A brief disinterested refusal. What other response could he expect to his taunting, insulting invitation? And it was both. He remembered as well as I how openly we rejoiced when Gregory declined to join us in the captain's cabin; a Gregory we considered patronizing, superior, but who, in reality, I knew now had only been a shy, left-out Gregory, a little at a loss, and trying to cover up his loneliness as he grew too old for childish fun without having achieved a youth's stature of his own. And now Randall dared insinuate I would again best enjoy the *Star* without him?

Liar and *coward* had meant nothing to him, either. I had been a fool, thinking the words a barb sharp enough to pierce his callousness, a fool to let him know green waves were still a memory.

I began to write, rapidly, indignantly, and then all at once I crumpled the paper and threw it in my wastebasket. Impulsively I reached for another sheet. An inordinate desire to face the truth, to acknowledge the truth, had seized me. There was something between Randall and me. Only a remnant, to be sure, of all we once had shared. Call it a sentimental nostalgia. Call it what one chose. But there it was. But here at hand was my chance to put an end to it as final as it would be irrevocable. I would accept Randall's invitation. I would go aboard the *Star*. With utter candor I would beg Randall, for the sake of all we had known of youthful affection and closeness, to go away again. To leave Aunty and Gregory and me in peace. The untarnished, proud peace we had fought for ever since he had been sent away. Why could he not show at very least

a trace of the kindness, the common decency, he ought long ago to have absorbed, living in Aunty's house? If he would not go for my sake or for Gregory's, then let him go for Aunty's sake. He had seen for himself how pathetic she was. He had been entirely, cruelly aware of the befuddlement, the stirring up of the past his coming had caused her, and would continue to cause as long as he stayed.

I would not mention the note to Gregory; it would serve no purpose but to further incense him. I daren't risk it. It was I, and only I, who could approach Randall. And if he listened to me, if that hard-won peace of ours were saved, I would have done something for Aunty in return for all she had done for me, and something for Gregory, whom I loved.

Before my impulsive courage could desert me, I began to write: "*Dear Randall—Thank you for your invitation to tea. I shall see you Wednesday. Lilas.*"

I had never before concealed anything from Gregory. Not the merest trifle. And the next two days were filled with awkwardness and unease. I had a feeling I was transparent. I was afraid to think of his anger if he found out about Randall's note. Quiet and controlled though he was, a limit could be reached. And now it was too late to tell him and confess that I had accepted. He would refuse to let me talk to Randall. And he would be hurt that I had not confided in him from the first, regardless of my motive. "Wives and husband shouldn't have secrets from each other," I could hear him say slowly. "It's never wise, darling." He would forgive me, but he would add, "I shouldn't have suspected you of ever wanting to hold things back." It was the small disillusionments that tarnished marriage: Gregory's trust in me would never again be implicit.

Wednesday took forever to come. I was fitted at my dressmaker's for a bombazine calling costume. I tried on hats at Madame Delphine's. I spent an afternoon feather-stitching infants' flannelette sacques for the Missionary Guild. Gregory and I went to a dinner before a Haydn and Handel concert. We had a whist evening and a Literary Club supper meeting.

Wednesday. Wednesday. I wanted it to come, and I didn't want it. Gregory remarked solicitously that I was "jumpy." He wondered if we were keeping too many late hours.

When Wednesday actually arrived and Wrenn came for his orders, as he did every morning after driving Gregory downtown, I told him I would not want him; a cab would do when I went out later.

I needed an excuse for the cab. He was pleased to make use of the day by having the floor mat of our own carriage rebound.

The mat *did* need rebinding—if I chose to insist on absolute perfection. And certainly Gregory and Aunty disliked anything that remotely approached the worn or neglected about our household equipment.

I thought it would be easy to give Wrenn the order. But somehow he too, made me feel transparent. I was glad when he went back to his stable. Ugh! I shivered with distaste. A horrible man, profiting so very comfortably from his stepdaughter's fall over a cliff edge. And we were tied to him forever.

The cab came for me at half past three. I sat as far back in it as I could. Not that I was doing anything wrong. Not really wrong. It wouldn't matter who saw me. Mrs. Gregory Spencer had every right to drive to the docks and take tea with her cousin, Captain Randall Spencer.

The livery-stable horse clattered down the cobbled hill to the waterfront, and onto the wharves, through a noisy bustle of longshoremen loading and unloading cargoes. Teamsters shouted and swore. There was loud ribald laughter and the smell of beer and gin and whisky as the swinging doors of saloons were pushed in and out, and glimpses of brawling, staggering men.

If Gregory knew I had come down here unescorted! I was relieved when my driver used discretion enough to pull up on the far side of a storage shed, away from the wharf traffic. "Wait for me," I told him. "I shan't be more than half an hour." I believed it. Half an hour would be all the time I needed to persuade Randall to go away, and to purge myself once and for all of any lingering foolish nostalgia. Half an hour. But that was before I caught sight of the *Star*.

She was berthed toward the end of a long narrow pier. I walked up a cleated gangplank, a gloved hand on the rope guards. The rhythmic creak of her deck planks was familiar as she rode with the gentle, almost imperceptible, rise and fall of bay water, and I seemed never to have forgotten, for an instant, the squeak of taut lines made fast to her mooring bits.

The *Star of China*. Was her fo'c'sle empty, her crew ashore? Would Randall and I have her to ourselves, as we used to revel in having her? And was Randall waiting for me in his cabin? He knew I could find it.

I smiled involuntarily, and was transported to a childhood I wanted to forget. All the years since I had boarded the *Star* were suddenly yesterday.

I wished I had not smiled, though. Randall had come to meet me. He had caught me unaware. What would his approach be?

"Welcome aboard, Lilas. I am glad you came."

"It was only because I must talk to you—talk to you privately—ask you a favor."

"A favor? Of me? What can I do for you? But shall we go aft? You can tell me over our tea."

He led the way to a heavy paneled door, painted white, and when he lifted its latch and we stepped over a sill, we were back in the captain's cabin.

"May I take your cloak? Your muff?"

"No, thank you . . . I can't stay . . . and please don't trouble to give me tea."

"It won't take a moment to pour out a cup." I unfastened the clasp of my cloak. I took off my gloves, let him put them with my muff on a chair. It seemed simpler, less awkward, than arguing. But I didn't sit down. I stood, looking about me, even after Randall had handed me a cup and saucer. I took milk and sugar and stirred my tea mechanically. The captain's cabin. The snug brass-bright enchanted cabin of only yesterday.

"Does it look the same to you?"

"You don't seem to have changed it."

"No. With me, an attachment is an attachment."

I stirred my tea again. How should I begin? How could I open the subject, say what I had come to say? This was the last place to help the words start. Why did Randall want me here? Why had he written his note?

He passed the familiar tin canister filled with pilot biscuit, and broke one of them so I could manage a piece. It was foolish of me not to have sat down; to stand, stirring my cup of tea, obviously ill at ease, not knowing how to plunge into what I had come to say, only put me more than ever at a disadvantage. I felt ridiculously gauche. I might

have been a schoolgirl, floundering, rather than Mrs. Gregory Spencer.

I was actually grateful for the conversation Randall made. Easy, natural, almost agreeable. Talk of Canton and Tientsin and Nanking. Talk of sampans on the Yangtze River. Talk of squalls and typhoons. He opened his ship's log. He showed me a chart of the China Sea.

He was Randall, back from the East.

The smell of the bay and the wharves, drifting through the brass-bound portholes, struck at me. Bilge. Tar. Copra. Spice. The scream of gulls, the creak of deck planks, and the hawser's straining squeak all assailed me.

If I were ever to say and be done with what I had planned to say . . .

I put down my cup purposefully. But speaking out was still difficult. I forced a small light laugh. "The captain's cabin. Can you believe it is really yours?" I was remembering more than I cared to as I glanced again around the cabin. And Randall, it seemed, could read my mind.

"Are you looking for the children who used to play here?" he asked. "I am afraid they have been gone too long to call back, Lilas."

"Yes. I know." There was a lump in my throat, an absurd lump. I tried to laugh again. "But their chest is still here. Their same old chest."

Did it sound as lightly inconsequential as I hoped? I crossed to the sea chest my eyes had gone to again and again from the moment I stepped over the sill of the captain's cabin.

Mistakenly, I let myself put a hand to it. The smoothness of its wood, the familiar feel of brass-bound corners, made the lump in my throat worse.

"Why don't you open it?"

Mockery was in his voice again, the cruel amusement of five nights ago when, as aliens, we had confronted each other in Aunty's drawing room across a pair of finches in a lacquer cage.

"Do, by all means. I hoped you might. Open it, Lilas," the mocking voice urged.

I got down on my knees and tugged at a brass hasp, and threw back a heavy lid. The poignant waft from the open chest was momentarily what it had always been—a mingling of sandalwood and sea damp. And then there was something more. Jasmine? Musk? Frangipani?

And where were the charts and the binoculars and all the other seafaring treasures that two children, lost now from each other, had once shared?

A shimmer of brocades filled the chest. Robes. Tunics. Imperial silks from Suchow. Wave green. Foam white. The gray of a sea bird's breast—of moonstones. *My* silks.

I let the lid drop. I stumbled to my feet. But Randall was not done with me. He came close and opened the chest again and held up the silks in stiff gleaming lengths. "I am afraid they wouldn't fit you, my dear Lilas. Occidentals are larger than the Chinese, of course, generally speaking, and the woman for whom I bought them can best be described as doll size."

"The—the woman?" I barely whispered.

"You haven't heard, Lilas? You mean to say Gregory hasn't come home with the news? He hasn't told you I am sleeping with a runaway concubine I brought back from Canton?"

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I SNATCHED up my cloak and gloves and muff. My cheeks were on fire. I longed to strike out at Randall. I longed to drag hold of those shimmering brocades and tear them to rags. But all I did was rush out of the cabin and down the *Star's* gangplank into the waiting cab.

Where had the afternoon gone? Nothing of it was left. "Hurry, please!" I told the cab driver. "Go the shortest way."

I must get home before Gregory. I must have time alone in our bedroom to stop shaking with so unreasonable, so shaming an anger—yes—and hurt. What did it matter who Randall had brought home from China? What possible concern was it of mine? None. None.

It was almost six o'clock. Lamplighters were going their rounds. When the cab had turned off Pacific Street into Taylor and drawn up at our carriage block, the gaseliers

shone out from chinks behind Aunty's lace curtains and drawn velvet draperies.

I had never come home so late.

Quickly I paid the driver and flew up the front stairs. Norah opened the door for me, and Gregory, with a toddy in his hand, strolled out of the library.

"I thought you were lost, darling."

"I'm sorry."

"Paying calls, were you?"

"No." He might ask where. The McAllisters'? The Fairs'? The Selbys'? The Stanfords'? "I was shopping and the traffic was fearful."

Was he looking at me oddly? "When Wrenn drove me home from the office he told me you had hired a cab."

"Yes." I explained carefully about the carriage mat, and then I murmured something about changing for dinner and fled upstairs.

Hurriedly I unclasped my cloak and the hooks of my street dress and pulled out the pins in my hat. I put on my handsomest dinner-at-home dress. A gold-colored thick wool that was a favorite of Gregory's, with sleeves that puffed at the shoulders and tapered, to fasten tightly at the wrists. I put on amber earrings and an amber pendant. I changed my street shoes to bronze kid slippers.

Contrition had goaded me to make up to Gregory as best I could for an unfaithfulness as real as though I had committed adultery. What had possessed me to stay on—to let the dark catch me? And nothing said that I had gone to say. Nothing finished.

Gregory's dark eyes were approving when we went into dinner. He smiled and lifted a glass of Chablis to me across the epergne of fruit that separated us. Nothing in his glance, nothing of attitude, was the least questioning. But

I was thinking, "Wrenn made a point of mentioning that hired cab. Does it mean he guessed where I went, and wants me to know he guessed?"

And Wrenn was already a blackmailer. How much more money would he demand—money just from me, that had nothing to do with what Aunty was forced to pay him, and what Gregory and I, someday, would have to keep on paying?

But I was letting a guilty conscience get the better of me. Wrenn could not possibly have guessed.

We got through the soup and the entree, the roast, and salad and dessert Norah and Lew passed, and then we went upstairs to have a visit with Aunty. Evening was so often her "best time"—the brief while between her supper tray and when she fell asleep.

Nellie had tucked a napkin, like a bib, under her chin. She was eating with the enjoyment of a hungry child. The finches hopped on their little brittle sticks of legs from seed cup to bits of cress thrust through the bars of their lacquer cage.

I saw Gregory glance at them with annoyance, and then glance away. More and more he had grown to dislike the birds and their almost constant trilling and twittering. The birds that were to remind Aunty of their giver. While Aunty and I chatted and Aunty managed the spoon in her swollen-knuckled, shaking hand, he got up from his chair and wandered about the room restlessly. He picked up this book and put it down, leafed through another. Our evening visits with Aunty, even when she was well enough, lucid enough, for a game of double solitaire or cribbage, rubbed his nerves raw. A good many men would have made excuses to avoid them. They would have gone to their club. But not Gregory, affectionate, dutiful Gregory,

who, like myself, owed everything in the world to Aunty. I watched him pick up the little silver bell on the night table. He tinkled it absently, and put it down. He helped himself to a chocolate from the box Aunty insisted should always be in reach of her bed. He bit into it, then made a grimace and tossed it in the grate.

The damask napkin under Aunty's withered, dewlapped chin was soaked with a dribble of soup. She tugged at it feebly. "Take it away, child. Ugh! Horrid! I've spilled. I've made a mess." Her face puckered. She was ready to cry.

"Never mind, Aunty dearest. Everyone spills, eating in bed." I took the napkin and brushed cracker crumbs off the blanket cover, and she looked happier.

"Hand me my Bible, there's a good girl. I'll read a chapter and then I shall go to sleep." She yawned and sank into her pillows. "I'm tired. Everyone please go away and leave me." She yawned again. "Everyone go away. Did you hear, Lilas? Did you hear, Gregory?" She turned her head with an effort. "It is you, isn't it, Gregory?"

"Of course, Aunt Edith." It was the quiet, soothing answer that Gregory had become used to giving.

"You are certain it's not Randall?"

My hands clenched. "You know it's not Randall, Aunty."

"True. True. He doesn't love his old Aunty. He was wicked. We had to send him away." Aunty's eyes turned to the finches, singing their throats out. "Such pretty cheerful birdies. They were a present, Lilas, did you know?"

"Yes, Aunty."

"Someone gave them to me. A wicked, dreadful boy. Did I ever tell you what he . . ."

"Good God, Lilas, do we have to stay for any more of this?" Gregory grasped my shoulder.

"Shh—careful! Don't let her hear. Say good night to her, and then we'll go."

Gregory leaned over the bed. He put his lips to Aunty's forehead. I didn't blame him for his outburst. A sickroom was no place for a man.

"Good night," he was saying. "Good night, Aunt Edith. A sound sleep to you."

It was all anyone could wish for Aunty, I thought, all that could be wished for oneself: a sound, dreamless sleep. When I, in turn, kissed her, she had already begun to snore. I took away her tray. I lighted her wax night taper, and made certain her silver bell was in easiest possible reach. I covered the bird cage with a square of black silk, turned out the gas, and tiptoed from the room.

Later, when Gregory and I had undressed and were ready for bed, it was Gregory who stood looking out the window into gray, damp blankness. "You can't see the bay for fog," he told me. "You can't even see the trees in the garden."

"I can hear them though. And listen to the buoys." I shivered in my nightgown. "How cold the water must be." I don't know what made me add with another shiver, "The water at the cove."

"The cove?" Gregory swung around quickly. "Forget the cove, Lilas," he ordered harshly. "You are a fool, letting yourself remember. And do you think I enjoy reminders?" Abruptly then his voice was apologetic. "I'm a bigger fool, letting it get under my skin. Forgive me, Lilas. It's just that I've managed to seal it all away—and now . . ." His arms went around me. I was grateful for his closeness. The sound of the buoy was like a moaning out there in the lonely dark. At the cove, foam-fringed icy tidewater would be washing, washing, high on the sand

and the rocks. And with shock and pity I realized that Gregory's imaginings all these years had been as dreadful as mine. Every bit as dreadful. Rosie keeping her cheap little rendezvous. Slipping in the darkness. Crying out, perhaps, as she fell, her cry carried hauntingly on the wind. Rosie lying dead on sea-wet rocks, her neck broken. A frightened furtive boy scurrying away. Gregory's coward of a cousin. And Gregory himself walking a path far too narrow, far too heavily hedged round with convention, to let him forgive a clandestine drive to the clifftops with Aunty's pantry maid, no matter how yellow that hair of hers, how white and smooth those arms. Young, proud Gregory, impeccable Gregory, terrified his perfect world, with its splendid, shining future, would crash around him. Small wonder he despised Randall for having pulled the Spencer family down to the level of paying blackmail.

I clung to him with my heart full, hearing the buoys and seeing, while I shivered, a swirl of cold waves dashing on rocks. I longed, for both our sakes, to erase the picture. "Hold me closer, Greg. Kiss me."

We stood at the window in each other's arms until Gregory gently put me away from him to close the shutters and draw the curtains with a clash of brass rings, the swift drag of velvet. He had shut out the thick gray fog that muffled the bay and the docks where the *Star* lay at anchor, but Randall was still in his thoughts when we got into bed. "Poor Aunt Edith and her 'wicked, wicked boy.'" He laughed shortly. "Thank God she doesn't know the latest about our charming cousin."

"The latest?" I wondered if he felt me stiffen in his arms.

"The whole town is buzzing. It doesn't take long for that sort of thing to get around."

"What sort?"

"The sort that we might have expected. Randall has his father's weakness, evidently. He has brought a woman back with him. A Chinese. The Exclusion Law doesn't seem to have bothered him, but then, rules and regulations were always the least of his worries. And I presume he understands the fine art of bribery. They say he smuggled her ashore and keeps her in a room on Dupont Street, over old Chung Wai's curio shop."

"Keeps her? You mean . . ."

"Exactly."

We lay in the dark without speaking for a few moments, and then Gregory observed reflectively, "Oriental women can be extraordinarily beautiful. There's a quality to their skin—a fineness, a kind of eggshell delicacy."

I could not see his face in the dark. I could only guess his expression was the same as when he discussed or handled the precious bits of jade or ivory or carnelian or crystal in his cabinets. But what would he do, I wondered, if I were to cry out, "There is no need to tell me. I have already learned what a Chinese woman can be like. She can be doll size. I have seen her clothes. I know the scent of her perfumes."

But I didn't cry out, of course. And I loathed myself, letting Gregory hold me close, close, and yet not having the courage to confess what I had done, confess where I had gone, why I had gone. I loathed the lies I had already told, the lies I would have to tell in the future.

When at last I fell asleep, it was to dream of the *Star*. The captain's cabin was awash with tidewater, ebbing, flowing, with a lip of foam. A huddled thing, lying on the soaked planking, was a Chinese doll—until its head turned, and then it was Rosie, her yellow hair streaming wetly,

her thin dress plastered close to her body, looking at me out of blank dead eyes that I closed with pennies from a newly bought purse. Randall wasn't anywhere. But Wrenn appeared, and lifted Rosie out of the water's reach. And then Gregory joined us, eating Aunty's chocolates and tinkling Aunty's little silver night bell.

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I WOKE bathed in perspiration. I was alone in bed. Gregory had gotten up quietly, breakfasted, and gone downtown evidently, leaving me to my hideous nightmare-ridden sleep. I lay exhausted for minutes. Limp. Still shuddering. In Aunty's house, though, you did the expected, the usual, and so I reached for a bellcord and rang for coffee. Then I got up and dressed for the street. There was no question in my mind as to where I was going, how I would pass what was left of the morning.

When I had buttoned my gloves and was waiting for Wrenn and the carriage to come around from the stable, I looked into the pier glass. My skin was sallow. My eyes, heavy. Why had I ever thought the taupe of my hat and of my broadcloth shopping ensemble, with its mole-skin collar, flattering?

Abruptly I turned away from my reflection and went downstairs. "Chung Wai's curio ship on Dupont Street," I

directed Wrenn when I stepped into the carriage. He could not possibly have guessed about the wharf yesterday. And a visit to Chinatown would mean nothing. Everyone knew Chung Wai's shop; everyone patronized it.

The blue marble-hard eyes that looked down at me from the box were expressionless. Wrenn touched his hat and flicked the horses lightly with his whip, and we were off down the hill.

For the first time in my life I realized to the full what was meant by the phrase, "burning with curiosity." It was an actual torment, the wanting to see for myself. The having to see.

Would I possibly, possibly catch any glimpse of her?

Wrenn pulled up the horses in front of a tiny shop with a jumble of pottery and silk and lacquer displayed behind its single dirty window. There was nothing for it but to get out of the carriage, however much I wished I had not come, and go inside and make some sort of purchase. Anything at all, to have a package to take home.

"Wait for me," I told Wrenn, and he touched his hat again, with the horrid glossy surface of correctness, the false servility, that had been a travesty all the years Aunty and Gregory and I had served our bondage to him. Our preposterous bondage.

What Aunty's Spencer pride had let us in for was unbelievable. And Gregory's fierce, exaggerated pride as well, I amended, as I walked into the shop. And I was making excuses for Randall.

What had he done, after all, that was so very dreadful? Taken a housemaid to the cliffs? Yes. And she had slipped and he had run away. Any boy might have run. Any boy at all.

The excuses were weak. I could not persuade myself to

accept them. I was on Aunty's side, Gregory's side, that was the only side, and was where I belonged.

I asked old Chung Wai to show me a pewter bowl. He brought out his best, eager to please Missie Spencer, a carriage customer. I asked to see bolts of silk. I priced a lacquer tea set. The tiny shop was stifling with the heat and fumes from an oil stove. My head began to swim. I thought I heard someone laugh. A woman. The laugh floated down from a balcony half-floor directly above the counter where my purchases were being wrapped. I looked up, but there was nothing to see but a gently waving bamboo curtain. Had I heard or only imagined laughter, sweet and shallow and light as the little clash of the glass wind bells Randall had brought back to Aunty? My own mouth was dry. "What sort of mouth have you?" I wondered. "You, up there." Was it small? Brilliantly red? Oriental women used lip salve. Was it set like a poppy, to bloom provocatively in the oval of her face? I imagined dark oblique eyes smiling. Thin painted arcs above them. Delicate almond-nailed hands, closing on an ivory fan. Her exquisite stiff brocades too heavily weighing for the reed she was.

I could not pay quickly enough for my parcels. I snatched them up and had to force myself not to run out to the street. Once back in the house on Nob Hill, I locked myself in my room against Nellie and her concern as to whether or not I wanted lunch in the dining room or should she bring it on a tray now that it was almost two o'clock?

"I have a headache," I told her. And I did. It wouldn't go away.

When it was nearing time for Gregory to come home I changed out of my street clothes. I smoothed the bed on which I had been lying and arranged my Chinatown pur-

chases prominently on the dressing table. Why should I conceal them? I would never again hide anything from Gregory.

While I still waited for Gregory's return, I wandered into Aunty's room.

She looked unwell, I thought, but she smiled at me, and nodded feebly toward the cage hanging in the window. "Do you hear my birds? My dear little birds?"

Their trilling was a spatter of liquid sweetness.

"Randall gave them to me. Will he come to see us again soon, do you suppose?"

"Perhaps."

Aunty's eyes closed, and with an enormous effort she opened them again. "I get so tired," she apologized. "It sounds silly when all I do is lie here. But I think a great deal, child, and that's tiring. I think, and think."

"What about, Aunty?" I asked it only because she wanted to talk, wanted a little attention.

"About you children. The three of you. There used always to be three. You, Lilas, and two boys, not just one." Her eyes were troubled, and had begun to cloud over. "Two boys. And there is something about the tide that keeps bothering me, but I can't get it straightened out."

She was only a pathetic, senile old woman propped among starched, embroidered pillowcases, and yet I stared at her, suddenly and oddly startled. That irrational, senseless talk of tides. There had been tidewater in my dream last night. A rush of it, swirling in the captain's cabin, washing over the Chinese doll who had turned her head and become Rosie, lying on sea-wet rocks.

I reached out and grasped Aunty's hand. "What about tides? Tell me." But it wasn't any use. She had forgotten what she had said. She pulled her hand away. "Ring

the bell, Lilas, I want my dinner," she ordered fretfully.

When Gregory came home, we dressed for a "soiree musicale," with dinner before. The evening was pleasant, and I forgot Aunty's irrational rambling, for the time being, at least.

There was a great deal more than a recital to put it out of my mind when Gregory, on the drive home, told me Randall had called at the Spencer and Company office and invited us both to come aboard the *Star of China* the next afternoon.

"You and I? Randall wants us?" I could not believe it.
"What on earth for?"

"Not for sweet company's sake entirely, he made quite clear." Gregory's mouth curved contemptuously. "He has a collection of antique snuff bottles for sale. Amethyst, pink quartz, sardonyx. He is acting for a dealer in Canton. There's a sizable commission in it for him, I shouldn't wonder. And he knew who to talk to, damn him. He knew I'd be tempted. He's sending the collection on to London if there are no bids here."

"You accepted for us both?"

"I couldn't get out of it. He's a clever devil. He has us cornered. He asked the Masons, and the Kingstons, too."

No, Gregory could not have gotten out of it. He and I were expected, naturally, to spend all the time possible with our newly returned cousin. It would look odd if we didn't.

Gregory's hand closed over mine as though he guessed what I was thinking. "My darling patient wife. And how soft your hand would be if you let me take off your glove. How smooth."

When the glove was off, he held my hand and fondled it as we drove along. He put it against his cheek.

I wondered if he felt the quick hard throb of my pulse?
Tomorrow. Tomorrow afternoon.

I did not fall asleep and dream that evening when we went to bed. Instead I lay awake while the clock on the stairs struck hour after hour. I heard fog bells. The buoy at Land's End moaned. Dawn grayed the dark masses of the swaying, dripping eucalyptus boughs outside the windows to the pewter of the bay. Two words refused to be dismissed from mind.

Tide. The sea water of my nightmare, washing coldly over Rosie, and running through Aunty's irrational troubled talk.

Smooth. The skin of my own hands. The eggshell glaze of a doll's oval slanting-eyed face. A kitchen maid's remembered white arms, bared by the rolled-up sleeves of a chambray uniform. And something more. The blanc de chine perfection of Gregory's Kuan Yin, Goddess of Good Fortune, Goddess of Mercy.

¤ 14

WRENN BROUGHT the carriage around the next afternoon and we stopped at the office for Gregory. It was obvious he had no intention of allowing our visit to the *Star* to be a larger blot than possible on the day. "You look charming, my darling," he told me as he settled himself next to me. "But then, of course, you always do. But there seems to be something a little special."

"Perhaps it's the excitement of wearing a new hat." I laughed. I had seen for myself, when I dressed, the oddly feverish brightness of my eyes, the color that went and came in my cheeks. I put up a hand in a gray suede glove to touch the plume that curled round my toque. Today taupe and mole were becoming. "All of Madame Delphine's hats are flatterers, Greg."

"So that explains your glow, does it?" Gregory picked up the carriage speaking tube. "Stop at the next flower stand, Wrenn," he ordered. When Wrenn pulled up, he got out,

and then came back with a bunch of violets, centered with a dark red rose. "Let me pin them." His face was close to mine. I felt the brush of his hands warm against my throat. The violets were limp, with the delicate languor of all flower stand blossoms too long in the sun. The rose was overblown. But the carriage was full of their sweetness. I put a hand over one of Gregory's. "There is no one quite like you. Do you remember my Covent Garden violets? I shouldn't want, ever, to forget them. Don't let me."

"Foolish Lilas! You could have done a thousand times better for a husband. Imagine Aunty's delight if you had spread your net in London and caught a duke." He looked down at me, smiling quizzically. "I shall never know why you chose me."

"You advanced your cause fairly persuasively," I reminded him lightly.

"I wanted you more than anything in the world."

When we reached the wharves, Wrenn maneuvered the carriage through the noisy bustling traffic of drays and wagons and carts and wheelbarrows to the pier where the *Star* lay at her quiet berth. My hand tightened over Gregory's. "I wish we needn't go aboard. Must we?"

"Yes."

"He wants to hurt us. He wants to get at us."

"He seems to have succeeded, so far as you are concerned. A butterfly on a pin if I ever saw one."

"You hate his coming back just as much."

"Agreed. But I shan't let him see it. And neither must you. If we do, he will only stay longer, for the pleasure of watching us squirm. Indifference is our only weapon, our only defense, Lilas. At least until we know what he is up to. I wish we did know."

A smart yellow brougham and a black landau had drawn up by the *Star's* gangplank. Evidently the Masons and the Kingstons had already arrived. I was relieved. Easier, by far, my meeting with Randall.

A turbaned Lascar cabin boy in a white jacket was waiting for us at the head of the gangplank. "Please, this way, Sahib and Sahib-mem," and we followed him aft like two strangers aboard the *Star* for the first time. I wondered what Gregory was thinking. His eyes were inscrutable. When we stepped over the sill of the captain's cabin, he was ready with a cool, "Here we are, the three of us again, and nothing has changed, I see, Randall." He had a quick, pleasant greeting for the Masons and for old Judge and Mrs. Kingston. They would not possibly have noticed his and Randall's avoidance of a handshake, and they could not have guessed how tightly my own hands were clenched in my mole muff.

"Will you do the honors, Lilas?"

I sat down at a table set with a tea service.

Randall took a bottle from a mahogany cellarette. "Bourbon for you, gentlemen?" He splashed siphon-water in tall glasses, dropped in ice. The Lascar passed small crisp rice wafers and a sweetmeat dish of sugared ginger and litchi nuts. The handleless cups I filled were of thinnest Kiangsi ware. Had Randall bought them for his runaway concubine? My eyes went to the camphorwood chest that held her brocades.

I pulled my eyes away. Randall was opening a carved wooden box lined with wadded cotton to exhibit his snuff bottles. The Kingstons and Masons made appreciative exclamations over their beauty and antiquity. I watched Gregory. Very carefully, each in turn, he picked up a pair

of smoky pink-quartz bottles. "They are extremely fine," he commented. He held a bottle to the light, and then let it lie in his open palm a moment.

"They are a pair. I shan't part with them. I'm keeping them for myself," Randall told him. "Do I make you jealous? As a collector, I mean?" he added easily.

"Not in the least." Gregory put the bottle back in the box. "As you yourself pointed out the other evening, I have already acquired pretty much everything I want. I've been amazingly fortunate."

"You have, indeed."

If only the Masons or the Kingstons would start talking. But it was Randall again. "There is nothing comparable to the collecting game: there's no end to its fascination. The treasures to be had if you make up your mind to pay the price. And the way they can change hands—the uncertainties, the gamble."

"Personally, I don't let go once I've got hold of something choice. I never have—and I doubt if I ever would."

I occupied myself by pulling on my gloves. The Masons and the Kingstons got up. After their good-bys to Randall, they turned to Gregory with affectionate messages for Aunty. For the space of a minute Randall and I might have been alone in the cabin. He was putting the box of snuff bottles on a railed shelf. So that the silence between us would not be conspicuous, I snatched at the first thing that came to mind for small talk. "Tell me about *my* box—my wedding-present box. Where did you find it?"

"In Tientsin. Do you like it? Have you opened it? I mentioned that it rather intrigued me, didn't I? That sort of thing always does. The smooth surfaces and the elaborate disclosures when you take a really good look inside."

I fastened my shoulder cape. The violets pinned to its

collar had shriveled. "They need water, poor things." I was seizing again on anything at all to say.

"The flower stands are still thriving, I see."

"Yes. They are on every corner." I turned away from Randall, wondering if he remembered as well as I the five-cents worth of flowers he used to buy for Aunty.

Ridiculous, this surge of nostalgia. Who knew better than I that the yesterdays were done for, and that a seventeen-year-old boy, strolling too near a cliff edge with Aunty's housemaid, had seen to their utter destruction?

Always a lock of black hair had straggled across the boy's forehead. It was something else I wished I had forgotten. And there was the way a smile could flash across the boy's thin dark face, and the loud, free shout of his laughter. No wonder Rosie had gone to the cove. No wonder she had cherished his offerings.

For the first time in all the years I had known about them, dried yellow lupine and dried kelp fronds, shells tied up in a handkerchief marked R.S. sent a pang through me for someone else's sake beside my own.

Luckless Rosie.

And for a first time Randall, too, was pitiable. The seventeen-year-old Randall who had seen Rosie plunge off the cliff, and who had lost his head and run, panic-stricken, and then found himself lying. Lies could spring with shocking, astounding suddenness from anyone's lips, it seemed.

Surely, surely Aunty could have been more understanding? She had banished Randall as though he were a criminal, deserving Siberia.

And if Randall had not been sent away . . .

If . . . if. It was too late for *ifs*. And I had Gregory, who was all I wanted. Everything I wanted.

When he and I said our good-bys to Randall, a certain

amount of polite hope was expressed by the three of us that we should meet again soon. "I shall be calling on Aunt Edith any day now," Randall assured us.

"She tires easily, as I think I told you. May I suggest, again, that it would be best if we let you know when she feels up to a visitor?" Gregory answered him. It was a door slammed in Randall's face, but he had the last word. "Just as you say. After all, she has her finches and her wind bells to keep her reminded of me."

He was inwardly laughing at us, deliberately goading us, and yet as we drove home, my belated, disturbing sympathy for the boy he had been lingered unaccountably. I hadn't much to say in the carriage. I only half listened to Gregory's opinion of the snuff bottles. He intended to have the whole collection. A way could always be found to get what you wanted.

I was quiet that evening at dinner. Afterward I played double solitaire with Aunty until she began to doze over the cards. Gregory came in as usual to say good night to her, and then we went to our own room.

When I was in my nightgown and peignoir, I sat down at the dressing table. Gregory took the pins from my hair, as he liked to do, and began brushing it. "Was the afternoon too much for you?" he asked. "You look tired, and you have scarcely said a word all evening. We carried it off though, thank God."

"The Kingstons and the Masons—and that means San Francisco—couldn't have dreamed us anything but delighted to have Randall back," I agreed.

"And my thanks to you, sweet." Gregory kissed my mouth. He picked up the silver-backed brush again. "Your hair is like silk, Lilas, beautiful, beautiful heavy silk—did you know it?"

"How could I not? It is what you always say."

"I run out of words. But now I shall let you plait it. You must come to bed."

I remember sighing. "I am tired," I confessed. I hesitated a moment, and then slowly I asked, "Need it all have turned out so sadly, Greg? Why should Aunty have let Wrenn get such a hold on us? I've been thinking. Couldn't she have confided in someone like Judge Kingston, for instance? Surely he might have managed things differently? He has always been close to our family. He would have done everything he could for Aunty and for Ran. And Ran was only a boy, remember. It was cruel, his being sent off—wicked, his paying and our paying, all our lives, to cover up what was nothing more than an accident."

"You are sorry for him, aren't you?"

"In a way. Not for who he is today, but for who he used to be."

"Don't waste your sympathy, Lilas. And don't indulge in sentimentality. It's a great mistake, and I shan't allow it." Gregory's voice was suddenly harsh. He gripped my shoulder so hard his fingers bruised through the lacy ribboned batiste of my gown.

"Greg, dear! Please—you are hurting." I tried to pull free.

"No, Lilas. Sit still. You are going to have to listen."

"To listen?" I stared bewilderedly at him in the mirror. His dark face was resolute, his mouth narrow and grim.

"You are going to hear the truth. It's time."

"I don't understand." A premonition of something unbearably dreadful swept over me. "The truth?"

"Yes. About Rosie's death. Aunt Edith hadn't the courage to tell you when it happened. Neither of us could bring ourselves to hurt you. Do you think for a moment

we didn't know what Randall meant to you? Do you think we weren't aware of how he dominated you? How he split Aunt Edith's house in two? Divided us into separate camps? Because we cared so much for you, Lilas, we agreed to let things drift. 'Rosie's accident' was the least hurting way to think of it for Aunt Edith and me as well as for you. But now . . ."

Gregory's grip on my shoulder was agony. "Now, you have to know. Rosie was pregnant when she died. Wrenn knew it at once when he found her sprawled on the rocks. Those starched uniforms and aprons of hers had hidden it until then, but that night she was wearing a sleazy pink silk dress. It clung to her, wet with sea water. And she hadn't slipped over the cliff edge, Lilas. She had been——"

"No! No! Don't say it."

"I shall say it, Lilas. I must. Rosie had been pushed. Strangled and pushed. Her arms were bruised, and her throat. Wrenn saw the marks. There were high waves that night, and an incoming tide that was to wash her away. But Wrenn found the shells. Wrenn began searching for her too early. And Randall hadn't counted on that when he murdered Rosie."

xx 15

THE TRUTH? No! No. It was some shocking, hideous mistake, some dreadful misconception of Aunty's and Gregory's. And they had borne the incubus of it for over eight years.

And Aunty and Gregory actually had believed, all this while, that Randall was a murderer? Randall, the boy with the black wind-tossed forelock, the sudden sweet smile that could magically illumine his dark taciturn face, just as Gregory's smile could flash unexpectedly.

They believed he had strangled Rosie, who carried his child inside her?

I hid my face on Gregory's shoulder, trying to shut out the horror of a body crashing on rocks. Over and over I babbled the futile, stunned, "No! No!" that he could not hush, even with his arms around me.

I was trembling. Shivering. Incoherent.

"Darling! Darling Lilas. I'm sorry. Terribly sorry. But I had to tell you. You couldn't go on not knowing. And do you understand now why I can't let you try to find excuses for him? There are none."

Gregory got me into bed. He piled blankets and quilts over me. He knelt at the hearth and stirred the ashes in the grate and heaped coal until a blaze danced. He hurried to the kitchen for milk to heat quickly on the gas ring in our bathroom and lace with brandy. "Drink it, Lilas. Drink it for me, darling." He held the glass to my lips. "Another swallow, please. Please try."

I was still cold when the glass was empty, cold to the bone. Had she screamed, that girl in the silk dress whose sleazy clinging had given away her secret? Had she cried out above the wind, before her throat was closed?

I imagined I heard her. I jerked upright in bed. "Listen! Listen, Gregory. Do you hear her, too?"

"Ah, Lilas, don't. Lie back. It's nothing. A gull." His arms were around me again. Gently he forced me back against the pillow. "Close your eyes. Try to sleep. What's done is done. And the telling is behind us. You can't be hurt any more."

I clung to him, shivering. I begged him to listen, to listen and to close the shutters!

Quietly he latched them. Quietly he drew the velvet draperies across them. And then he came back to bed. "Go to sleep, darling. Go to sleep." He said it, and said it, holding me in his arms, until at last my eyelids drooped.

It was midmorning when I wakened. Gregory had loosened his arms from around me and long been gone, but I saw a note on my dressing table, propped against the silver hairbrush. I dragged myself exhaustedly from bed to read it with eyes that looked back at me, shadow-

smudged and blank, from my mirror. "*I love you. G.*" It was another embrace, Gregory's arms around me with tenderness and solicitude, and yet I was no warmer. The numbness that encased me was actual; I fumbled futilely with the buttoning and hooking of my clothes, and had to ring for Nellie to help me. When I was finally dressed, I made a pretense of eating breakfast, and I gave household orders and discussed menus with Sang as I did every morning. But I was not in the house on Nob Hill. I was at the cove.

I could see more than the cove. I saw Aunty's carriage, with Wrenn on the box, driving along the highway in search of a lonely field, with a dead yellow-haired white-armed girl for company inside, her head lolling on its stem of a bruised broken neck.

In the middle of the morning I went down the hall to see Aunty. The sun was bright against her front windows. White hyacinths bloomed on her bedside table. The finches in their lacquered pagoda were preening themselves after a bath and trilling rapturously.

"Come and sit down, child." It was one of Aunty's "good days," I saw. She was propped high against her pillows, rummaging through a box of laces with thickened, crooked old fingers weighted with rings lost in fat. "Nellie lets things go so disgracefully," she announced sharply. "Look at this jabot, if you please. Ragged—positively ragged. What do you suppose she allowed Teena to do with it—put it through a mangle?"

"Never mind, Aunty. I'll mend it." I tinkled the little silver night-stand bell for Nellie and she brought me a mending bag. I threaded a needle and slipped on a thimble and picked up the jabot. I wished I had not come to say good morning to Aunt Edith; the finches sang with an

unceasing, merciless sweetness that made my heart contract, and the small draft of Nellie's coming and going through the doorway had started the soft clashing of the painted, tasseled wind bells. Randall had been right: Aunty could not possibly forget him, thanks to his home-coming gifts. Nor could anyone else. But I would have to learn a way. If only I dared tear down and smash those strips of jangling glass. If only I dared open that pagoda cage, open a window. If only Randall, who in Aunty's and Gregory's eyes was a murderer, could vanish, for all our sakes, into some sort of limbo.

It was in this same bedroom that Aunty, her face gray, had told me Randall must be sent away. She would have known about Rosie some five short hours, no more.

I had heard the clock on the landing strike two when Randall crept in. I had slept, and then wakened again, hearing Wrenn. After that my early breakfast; the oatmeal and cocoa that had made me want to retch when she called me in, with her plan laid, her lies concocted. They had been lies to be told the world for pride's sake, but they had been lies of love as well. Because Aunty had loved Gregory and me. Because Aunty had loved Randall.

And so had I, so had I.

All the old pain suffered for a Randall gone away, all the new anguish stabbing me because he had come back, was in that involuntary, silently cried-out admission.

Ran. Ran. And all at once, in a flaring up of faith as suddenly, as surprisingly, illuminating as one of his own smiles, he was again the boy he had always been.

Never, never could he have done what Wrenn and Aunty and Gregory believed he had done. Not Ran, the other half of my very self.

I was no longer cold. Wonderingly, joyously, I accepted

the extraordinary warmth rushing through me. And let the wind bells clash all day, all night! Let the finches sing and sing! It no longer hurt to think of the Randall I had once known. Never mind, either, what he was today. Let him be whom he chose to be. Let him live his life as he chose. The opened chest in the *Star of China's* cabin, the spilling silks, were none of my concern. Why should they be? I too, was only what circumstances had made me. I too, had chosen a life of my own; the only life I wanted ever, no matter how it might differ from anyone else's choice. But now, oh now, a black-haired boy could still live in my heart. He could still smile, and my smile would answer. He could laugh, and I could laugh with him. And for Aunty and for Gregory, the galling weight they had carried for eight years would be lifted, if only I could find a way to prove how terribly, cruelly mistaken they had been.

And Wrenn, mean-souled, whip-lashing Wrenn, the opportunist, reaching greedily into Aunty's offered purse, must be convinced. Afterward, we could dismiss him. Never, never again need we ride behind him and see on the seat next us, no matter how many carriages we bought, a girl with a broken neck.

I let the jabot drop from my lap, and my thimble and scissors and spool of thread. I dropped on my knees by Aunty's bed and took her hand. I did not know how to begin or where to begin; she would have to help me all she could, and Gregory would have to help, and Wrenn. Somehow, somewhere, I would find a way to clear Randall.

I waited until I was certain I could steady my voice. "Do you hear your birds singing, Aunty? Do you remember who gave them to you?"

Not a "good" day after all. Only a "good" half hour. Aunty was not listening. "Pick up my jabot this minute,

Lilas. I never saw such an untidy child. Everything dropped in a heap."

"I asked you about the birds, Aunty," I persisted gently. "Who gave them to you?"

"They were a present, Lilas. Such a lovely present."

"But from whom, Aunty?"

She turned her clouded eyes toward me. "A very wicked boy," she answered simply. "A very, very bad boy."

"What was his name, Aunty?"

"Why, Randall, of course. Randall Wentworth Spencer." She was looking at me a little anxiously. "We don't talk about him, remember, child? We don't discuss him with anyone. Not with the maids. Not with Lew or Sang. It's all too sad."

Her vagueness was growing. In a moment she would again be just a senile old woman until another brief "good" period gave me my chance. And there were so many questions. "I know it is sad, Aunty," I agreed quickly. "Terribly sad. It breaks my heart. But what if there were some sort of mistake? What if Randall weren't bad?"

"But he is, Lilas. He is wicked. The wickedest boy you could imagine." Aunty struggled to pull herself up on her pillows. "Close the door, Lilas," she whispered, "so no one else can hear. And come closer to Aunty. I have something to tell you; Aunty has to send Randall away."

My skin crawled. "But it wasn't Ran who was wicked, Aunty. It couldn't have been." I was Lilas, the child, protesting again. "Not Ran, Aunty!"

The clock on the landing began to strike. Aunty was not listening to me. "Where is my soup?" she demanded querulously. "Where is Nellie? I always have soup at eleven."

Nellie was at the door with a tray before the last

stroke sounded. Aunty nodded with satisfaction. "My nice chicken soup. Thank you, Nellie. But Randall mayn't have any, because he is bad." She shook a stern finger at a child she saw at the foot of her bed. "Go to your room, Randall. Aunt Edith isn't pleased. She doesn't like little boys who put their fishy hands on the banister."

It was hopeless. I could only be glad that for Aunty a murderer and a small boy who had neglected to wash his dirty hands were equal now in nefariousness. Tears rushed to my eyes, stinging and compassionate. Before I left the room, I leaned over quickly to kiss her cheek.

That evening Gregory came home with a long white cardboard box of flowers for me. "I thought about you all day," he told me soberly as I lifted out the jonquils and iris and freesias, exclaiming over them, and raised my mouth to meet his kiss. "I was afraid to think how the day was going for you. I didn't want to tell you what had to be told. You know that, don't you?"

"Poor Greg." His eyes were tired and grave. Poor Greg, truly, carrying what he had carried so long. And loving him as I did, I longed to lighten the load. I longed to share the bright blaze of faith that so suddenly had flared to warm me as no fire in a grate, no brandy and hot milk, no circling arms, had warmed me. "I have been thinking of Rosie all day," I told him quietly. "But it wasn't Randall who killed her. I know it wasn't."

"It was, Lilas."

"No! Nothing, nothing, could make me believe it. And, oh, Greg, dearest Greg, you mustn't believe it, either. How can you? How could you possibly accept it as true? And how Aunty herself could believe anything so preposterous! The whole thing is fantastic. We knew Ran had his faults. Of course he had faults. I was never blind to them,

any more than you. He was headstrong. He was wild, inconsiderate. But he was Ran. And he didn't do it."

"I had to believe it, Lilas. And so did Aunt Edith. Just as you will have to. We were both like people brought down by some horrible incurable illness, but what could we do but accept the facts that faced us? Nothing could change them. And Lilas, Aunty had told me about the shells and Randall's handkerchief and the sand, but earlier that night I knew for myself that Randall had been out of the house."

"You knew? How?"

"I heard him slip down the back stairs. It wasn't the first time. But he and I were never on good terms; he resented my being older, he resented Aunt Edith's discipline. He thought me smug—self-righteous. I couldn't go to Aunt Edith telling tales. But that summer, when you and she were in Menlo Park and he ran wild, I should have had the sense to say something—do something."

Gregory broke off to take me in his arms. "The only answer for you, my darling, is the same as it was for me after it happened: acceptance. A kind of submission. The realization that only the day at hand, and the day ahead, count, and that you must never look back."

"But I do look back. I can't help it. And anyway, I want to now, Gregory, because it makes me all the more certain Randall didn't kill Rosie. We knew him too well. We knew exactly what he was like."

"Did we, Lilas? Who truly knows anyone? You have always been naïve—innocent. You sometimes make me feel a thousand years old. But can't you see for yourself why you are refusing to believe the truth? You made an image, long ago, and called it Randall, and put it on a pedestal. You worshipped. You did. You did, darling. And it was diffi-

cult enough for you when a few first cracks showed—but now you are shutting your eyes rather than watch the whole thing crumble."

"It's not so! My eyes aren't shut."

"But they are, Lilas. Even with them open you never saw Randall as he was." The half smile Gregory gave me was wry. "If you knew how much I used to envy him. I'd see you running along the shore with all that hair of yours streaming. I'd wish it were I, instead of Randall, catching up with you. I wanted you to be my Lilas, even then—but it never was, because I was afraid of acting like a clown. You would have laughed at a big boy like myself racing after a child who preferred someone else."

"But you were always so high and mighty, so disapproving!"

"No, Lilas." Gregory's eyes were bitter. "It was only that I didn't know how to laugh as easily as Randall. I didn't know how to break rules as lightly. But you thought me a stick by comparison. And do you suppose I enjoyed seeing him get around Aunt Edith? I deliberately tried to please her. I put my mind on it. I wanted her affection. But Randall got it gratis. And in spite of the reason for his going, the happiest day of my life came when the *Star* sailed. And now, to think of him back and not knowing his reason for coming."

"Poor Greg." For a second time that evening I said it, with my whole heart going out to him. "Never mind. Never mind. We've got each other. Nothing else matters. No one. You did catch up, in the end."

xx 16

I COULDN'T get to sleep that night. I longed for morning to come and another chance to probe. I was determined to wring from Aunty every possible clue as to why, on the night of Rosie's death, she had so immediately, completely, accepted Randall's guilt.

She had told me one story as a child. Now I wanted the story she could tell me as a woman.

I wanted every detail. What Wrenn had told her—with exactness. What Randall had said when she faced him. That, too, with exactness. The horror of it in detail. And then each detail to be mulled over separately by me until I found a way to vindicate Randall.

To whom else could I go?

Not to Wrenn. I hadn't the courage. Not Wrenn unless I got nothing from Aunty. A last resort. And not to Gregory. In no case.

Step by step, with Aunty. Leading her on, carefully,

gently. Trying not to hurt her. But by daylight I had persuaded myself that even cruelty could be justified.

I slept late and filled a miserable day with dressmaker fittings. Shortly before five o'clock I went into Aunty's room and sat down by her bed. The embroidered pillow slips, edged with torchon lace, their freshness pulled over plumped-up goosefeathers, smelled of the lavender bags in the linen closet, and of eau de cologne. Aunty, in one of her ruffled bed jackets, her hair carefully dressed, was playing solitaire, but most of the cards had fallen from the board to the floor, and she was yawning. She patted her mouth and sighed. "What a waste of time, all this stupid sleeping. It makes the days run into each other in the most astonishing fashion. Here it was just Christmas the other day, and now Nellie insists we soon will be getting on to Lent. If it's true, Lilas, don't forget to have Sang bake hot cross buns for Good Friday."

It was an opening. "You used to tell Sang he must leave the raisins out of our rice pudding during Lent, and the icing off the cakes," I reminded her lightly. "Do you remember the faces Gregory and I—and Randall—used to make when we came to the table?"

"Randall's were always the worst, though he ate in his room more frequently than at the dinner table, as I recall."

"Yes," I was quick to agree, "you had to punish him." And then, feeling my way a little further, carefully, carefully, "Not that he was ever really bad, really wicked."

"Wicked?" Aunty considered a moment. "It seems to me someone was very wicked indeed, child, now that you mention it. Let me just think."

I reached out a hand to put over one of hers. "You used to say it was Randall, Aunty, but I am sure there was a mistake."

"Was there?" Aunty frowned doubtfully. "I do dislike the way things get so jumbled in my head." The finches were trilling, and her face lighted. "Did I tell you, dear? Randall brought me a lovely present. My birds. My pretty sweet birds, and my wind bells. He has been in Canton, you know."

"Why did he go, Aunty?"

"Why? Because I sent him. Because he murdered Rosie. Wrenn's Rosie. She was a stupid, lazy little creature. Never once did she polish the breakfast silver properly. The spoons always had an egg yolk look."

"How do you know Randall killed her, Aunty?"

"What a silly question! Because Wrenn told me so, of course." She started to yawn again, and then suddenly her faded eyes were uncertain, concerned. "Was it a secret about Rosie?" She sighed again. Already her attention had wandered. She pulled her hand away to pick up a jack of spades from the board over her knees.

But I wouldn't stop. I couldn't. "Won't you tell me again about the night Rosie was killed? What did Wrenn say when he came into the house?"

"I remember perfectly. It was most upsetting. He said, 'Rosie is dead. Your fine Master Randall strangled her.' Dear me, dear me, Lilas, where do you suppose the queen has gone?"

I gathered up the scattered cards on the rug. "Here is your queen. Why did you believe Wrenn, Aunty?"

"Did I? Yes, I suppose I must have if I sent Randall away . . ."

It was hopeless. And, suddenly, far too cruel, too dangerously painful a probing to go on with. Aunty had struggled upright against her pillows. Stark horror filled her eyes. "I kept looking at Randall's hands," she babbled. "I kept

thinking, 'He is Randall, he is my nephew, but he put those hands around Rosie's neck.' Don't tell anyone," she begged me in a difficult gasped-out whisper. "I am certain it's a secret. Promise me you won't tell, child—not ever."

"Of course I won't tell, Aunty." I was terrified at what I had done to her. I tried to soothe her. I tried to make her lie back against the pillows.

"You promise, child. You promise?" She was still begging pitifully when there was a tap at the door and Gregory walked in.

He came quickly to the bed. "Good evening, Aunt Edith." He put his lips lightly to her forehead and then gave me his evening home-coming kiss and murmured, "What's wrong, darling? What upset her?"

Aunty was clutching at Gregory's sleeve now. "You won't tell either, will you, dear boy? Promise, Gregory! Promise!"

"Aunty is going to have her supper," I broke in with a hurried warning shake of my head. "I'm sure Sang is sending up something very nice indeed. Will you ring, Greg, so Nellie knows Aunty is ready for it? And then won't you sit down and tell us about your day?"

She forgot her horror as suddenly as she had remembered it. She let me smooth her bedcovers and resettle the combs in the elaborate white puffs and coils that augmented the thin wisps underneath them, and sponge and dry her hands.

Gregory's quiet, kind voice flowed on smoothly. The finches trilled and trilled, swinging on their perch.

When Nellie brought a tray, Aunty ate cut-up squab and rice and apple snow. The fork and spoon in her palsied hand clattered against the plates. The napkin around her neck was stained with spilling.

"I'm tired," she sighed when she was finished. ". . . all my bones are out of joint. . . . My strength is dried up like

a potsher'd. . . . Take the tray, Lilas, and both you children run away and let Aunty take a little rest."

"Would you like Nellie to settle you for the night, Aunty?"

"No. I shall just lie back and listen to my birds and my wind bells."

Her drowsy murmurings followed us to the door. "It's interesting, their having come from China. I knew a boy, once . . ."

She was asleep before she had finished.

"You look done up, Lilas. Has she been out of her head all day?" Gregory asked with concern.

"No, but she had a dream."

"A nightmare, I should judge." The comment was made soberly.

"I'll go and change, Greg." I wanted to put the afternoon out of my mind.

"Very well. And I'll have my toddy."

When I came downstairs, Gregory was standing by the drawing-room hearth, looking into the fire that blazed against the cold and damp of the February evening. He had no smile for me as I sat down. His dark face was grave and disturbed.

"What was it Aunt Edith wanted me to promise, Lilas?" he asked quietly.

"She—she had Randall on her mind."

"What made her think of him?"

"I don't know."

Gregory put down his toddy glass and came over to me. He knelt by my chair and took my hands in his. "Tell me the truth, my darling," he urged. "I can half guess. You questioned Aunt Edith about Randall and Rosie, just as you questioned me, was that it? Ah, Lilas, Lilas, it's such

an old, ugly story, why can't you let it drop? Randall means nothing to us. He hasn't for years."

"But he did once." My voice shook. "It's the looking back—"

"I told you, Lilas, I won't permit sentimentality. And I meant it. There's nothing more unhealthy. I grant you the three of us grew up together, and that there were ties of a sort. But you know, as well as I, Randall was always an outsider. He never belonged. And even though Aunt Edith loved him, he was a constant trial to her. And how look what he has done to her. She's a broken ranting old woman."

And she was. I remembered Randall's hands, that poor tormented Aunty remembered. Strong sun-browned hands. I remembered Wrenn driving us so many times along the road to the cove. But the road didn't end when it got to the cliffs. It went on to the beach. And at the beach: . . .

I was grasping at a straw. At the beach there were various restaurants and taverns, some merely "gay" and patronized by men-about-town who drove out for dinner with girls from the theater world; others, entirely disreputable. What if Rosie had been what people described as "loose"? Might Randall have been only one of a number of young men? Even though the handkerchief in Rosie's bureau was Randall's, even though they had gathered the shells together and picked the lupine, and even though the sand on her closet floor bore testimony to their cove assignations, couldn't she have driven along the beach road that last night with some one who wasn't Randall? The cliffs would have been a convenience to any man who wanted to get rid of her. Not just Ran.

I put it to Gregory, and he heard me through. All the suppositions. Before he answered me, he got up to stand

by the hearth again. His face, in the firelight, looked old and infinitely regretful. "Must it always be I who has to say the hard, hurting things, the true things, to you, Lilas? Aunt Edith had your same hope of finding another answer. She asked Wrenn the night it happened, but he swore up and down that Rosie had never looked at a man before that summer. He hadn't allowed it. He was strict with her and she obeyed him, until Randall got hold of her that summer Wrenn was in Menlo Park."

Gregory broke off abruptly and turned his face from me. "Hold onto old loyalties if you must, Lilas. I'll give up trying to argue," he said wearily. "Stay a child if you find it easier than growing up and facing realities. But stop harassing Aunt Edith. For God's sake, don't keep at her. It's the one thing I ask of you. If she's going to die, let her die in peace. This continual dredging up . . ."

Quickly, remorsefully, I put my arms around him. Eight years of it for Gregory, and I was finding mere days intolerable.

"Forgive me, Greg. I haven't meant to make it worse."

@@ 17

NELLIE KNOCKED at our door the next morning before we were up to report worriedly that Aunty had complained, over her early coffee, of a restless night, and demanded that Wrenn be sent off to fetch Dr. Mason.

As we hurriedly dressed, I suffered a thousand regrets, the deepest contrition. "It was my fault, Greg. All my fault."

"You are exaggerating, darling. Aunt Edith is bound to have her off times. A bad night doesn't mean your questioning was responsible. Even if you had been to blame, the damage is done. All either of us can do is try our best not to upset her again in any possible way."

He did his best to lessen my self-reproach, but when we went into Aunty's room and I saw her lying sunk in her pillows, her face like yellow wax against the linen, it welled up to overflowing.

"Aunty. Aunty, dear, didn't you sleep at all? Why didn't you ring? Why didn't you call us?"

She could have rung if she had chosen to, but she could not have called out, I realized. Certainly we wouldn't have heard. When she said a good morning, her voice was thin and weak, a spun-out thread. Her left eyelid drooped. Did her mouth sag, too, almost imperceptibly, at its left corner? I glanced in dismay at Gregory. His nod was answer.

Aunty caught our exchanged glances. "Don't stand there like two ninnies, looking so frightened," she rebuked us with feeble tartness. "I'm not in the least ill, children. I did toss a good deal during the night. And when I dropped off finally, I had a number of wretched dreams. At least I suppose they were dreams. I shouldn't like another night of the same sort. That's why I sent for Tom Mason—he can leave me some pills." Her voice trailed away exhaustedly, and a worried expression shadowed her face. Her troubled gaze was fixed momentarily on Gregory. "Have I ever happened to mention to you, dear boy, how mixed up I get? I've told Lilas. And that's why I am not quite certain about the dreams being dreams. They may have been only my thoughts going round. I do so much thinking, lying here in bed—and none of it seems to straighten out. But that's something else I told Lilas, and I mustn't repeat myself. Old people do, sometimes. It's a bad habit to fall into."

Her voice trailed away again, and her eyes closed. We thought she had fallen asleep, but suddenly she half raised herself from the pillows to ask clearly, "Did Aunty have a birthday, children? Is that why there were presents?" The troubled uncertainty was gone from her eyes. She looked pleased. "Lovely, lovely presents, all the way from China?"

It was too much for Gregory. While I stayed by the bed, he went to the windows to stare through the lace curtains at

the street below where Chinese houseboys, all along the block, were sweeping the sidewalks and scrubbing marble steps. Soon the butcher and grocery boys, and the iceman, and the vegetable vendors would pull their carts up to the curb.

It could have been a morning like so many other mornings, with a quietly pleasant, entirely secure day stretching ahead.

How Gregory must be loathing Randall—and would he ever forgive what my probing, my quizzing, had done to Aunty? Would I ever forgive myself?

And why hadn't I, in the very beginning, somehow disposed of those trilling birds? ". . . Rosemary . . . for remembrance . . ." Instead, the Spencer household had a pair of finches, and the light, sweet clash of swaying wind bells.

Gregory was still at the window when Dr. Mason hurried into the house. We left him alone with Aunty, and then he joined us in the library.

"I have given your aunt a sedative," he told us. "She's comfortable enough—but she has had another slight stroke. I suppose you guessed it. And there's a heart condition."

"Will she pull through?" Gregory asked.

"She could live for years or she could die any moment. Fundamentally she has an iron constitution. On the other hand . . . The important thing is to call me, or whatever doctor you can get hold of the quickest, if there is the slightest hint of another attack coming on. And keep your aunt quiet. Mentally and physically quiet. No callers. No trying to get up. And I'll drop in again this evening."

Wrenn drove him home, and Gregory and I went upstairs to look in on Aunty. She was asleep.

"What about engaging a nurse?" Gregory whispered.
"Ought we?"

"Not unless Dr. Mason suggests it. Aunty hates being fussed over. Perhaps we can persuade her to let Nellie move into the dressing room so someone is with her at night. I hesitated. "We wouldn't want a stranger with Aunty, would we? Mightn't it be awkward?"

"I see your point: but won't Aunt Edith talk just as much in front of Nellie?"

"Not as dangerously, I think, Greg. Nellie is as familiar as you or I to her; subconsciously, no matter how she wanders, Aunty would always recognize her for what she is —one of the housemaids. And by now keeping secrets from the servants is second nature to her."

"It's a sound enough theory. I hope you're right about it."

We stood silent, both of us knowing what could happen if I were not right. I drew closer to Gregory. He put an arm around me, and kissed me. "I am going to the office; I'll take a cab. I can't do Aunt Edith any good staying home. You mustn't stay either. Tell Nellie we'll double her wages—triple them—if she is willing to make Aunt Edith her responsibility. I shan't let you be tied to an old woman's sickroom, Lilas. You need to get out. You need diversion. These past two weeks haven't been pleasant." His arm around me tightened. "Be my dearest, very dearest, obedient Lilas, and stay out of Aunt Edith's room as much as you can. I'm not being unfeeling, but we both have lives of our own to lead."

He lifted my chin in his hand and looked down at me, trying to make his smile convincing. "Run out and spend a fortune this morning. Buy some clothes. Rush the season and order a spring bonnet. Tell Madame Delphine your lord and master has ordered her to sell you something utterly ravishing. Plumes! Flowers! Ribbons! Veiling! A

confection, in other words. And I want us to give a dinner or two. There's no earthly reason why we shouldn't." The smile disappeared. "And every argument in favor of it, Lilas. That is, if we choose our guests selectively and include Randall."

"Randall?" I gasped the question, already knowing the answer: the Gregory Spencers must continue to keep up appearances. But Randall at our table again?

Gregory felt me stiffen. His arms dropped. "We all have our nightmares, Lilas. Mine happens to be that we've let Randall know we are afraid of him. If I could only make you understand. Let Randall suspect for a minute what his coming back has done to us, and we'd never be free of him. He knows he's safe enough himself. The purgatory would all be ours—the constant reminder, the wondering what he's up to."

He left me standing in the hall. In a moment or two I heard the front door close.

In a curious flash of memory I saw him in Aunty's carriage the afternoon Randall discovered the cove. As we drove home, I had been chosen to approach Aunty about future visits, because Gregory had stated matter of factly, "She likes you best, Lilas. Then Ran, and then me." And Greg always wishing he were first.

I suddenly longed to please him with the most extravagant, charming hat in the world. And if dinner parties were necessary, I would arrange as many as he chose.

I bought my hat. It was my second choice. When I tried on a gray tulle and velvet and Madam Delphine commented enthusiastically, "*Ah, parfaitement! Le gris des yeux de Madame Spencer,*" I took it off. A pale ecru-color Tuscany straw, with wheat and draped chiffon around the crown, suited me even better. The ecru could, of course, be called

sand—and I didn't care to think about sand, any more than moonstones.

But Gregory would be disappointed if I didn't come home with something.

When one of Madam Delphine's little apprentice girls had brought it out to the carriage, I told Wrenn to turn off O'Farrell Street to Dupont, and stop at Chung Wai's. Why? Because everyone bought fruit blossoms in Chinatown—everyone made the most of their short season—but Aunty had never had exactly the right vase.

I bought the quince and plum branches, and I spent a good deal of time looking at vases and choosing a tall cloisonné on an ebony stand. But I did not hear any fancied tinkle of laughter.

I arranged the blossoms in the new container when I got home, and put them on the hall table, except for a few twigs I saved for my dressing-table vase.

To make room for them, I moved my powder jar. And I moved the ivory box Randall had brought from Tientsin. Should I get rid of it? I had debated the question a number of times, but to make an issue of putting the box out of sight in some closet or bureau drawer would only give it importance, I decided.

And it had none to me, and presumably to Gregory, or he would never have allowed me to keep it. Randall's wedding-present was nothing more than a cluttering ornament.

Admittedly I had glanced at it now and again. It was only a lidded-over smooth-surfaced box, intricately carved inside, containing another box, and another and another.

I picked it up and opened it, and then, a little hurriedly, put it down. It had occurred to me that our Spencer lives were like the box. Everything a smooth surface until you

looked inside and saw—what was Randall's curiously apt phrase—"the elaborate disclosures."

With a twig of quince in my hand I went to Aunty's room. Gregory could have no objections to brief look-ins; short cheerful little visits with a careful avoidance of anything troubling.

Nellie had brought up a tea tray, and I filled a cup for myself and sat down by the bed. Aunty was holding her own cup in both shaking hands, but most of the tea had spilled on the bedclothes. Her face looked more than ever like yellow wax against the starchy frilled pillowcases, and her voice was a whisper; but she smiled at me, and was glad of company, and wanted to know where I had been all afternoon.

I told her about my hat, and gave her the quince twig.

The moment it was out of my hand, I knew how inexpusably stupid I had been.

"Randall used to go to Chinatown. He used to tell me about a shark-fin soup, though I can't say it appealed to me." She took a thirsty swallow of tea dregs. "Did you know he was home, Lilas? Did you know he came to see me? And he brought me my birds. No one else ever gave me such a lovely present."

I forced a smile. "You never told us you liked birds, Aunty. Gregory and I would have given you an aviary full if we'd known."

"Randall knew without me telling. I suppose he is very busy, just getting into port, but I'm sure he'll be coming again soon." She sighed. "Gregory won't want him to come. He doesn't like Randall. Did you know that, Lilas? It's sad, but there was something once—something extremely unpleasant."

"It was all a long time ago, Aunty. Don't think about it."

"Don't think? What else have I to do, child, lying here in bed?" Her eyes were puzzled now. "Why do you suppose so much of it is a muddle? A part of this, and a part of that, and a part of the other, all mixed up."

I patted her hand. "I've told you before, Aunty, that everyone forgets, everyone finds things confusing now and then. Especially when one isn't well."

There was another pause. "The muddle annoys me because of its not being my fault," Aunty announced; then, weakly, "I try very hard to think things through, but everything slips away before I can quite get hold of it."

I couldn't resist my chance. Nothing could have made me hold back my question. "What do you mean by 'things,' Aunty? What kind of 'things'?"

"Just things," she answered helplessly. "That's exactly the trouble. I don't really know. Just odds and ends that worry me. The boys, of course—I think about both the boys." Another pause and another sigh. "One so good, and one so wicked." The sigh, this time, was resigned. "'For now we see through a glass, darkly.' Perhaps I shall be seeing more clearly one of these days, before too long. Just how ill am I, child?"

Aunty struggled to sit up among her pillows. "I shall want to be buried in my faille, with the Chantilly lace," she declared firmly. "And be sure my teeth are in. I'd like my pearls, but there's no use wasting them. They are for you, Lilas."

I held back an hysterical laugh. Pearls. Lace. Teeth. Aunty being Miss Edith Spencer of Nob Hill.

"I ought to scold you. You are talking too much, and tiring yourself," I told her. "I shan't stay a minute longer. Try to take a nap."

I need not have urged the nap. Her eyes were already

drowsy. And perhaps because the birds were trilling so loudly, she was not Aunty, but a changeling again, as confused and anxious as she had been a moment later.

"Did I tell you what a muddle things are in, Lilas? Did I tell you how wicked he is? I am afraid it's true. You won't believe it, but it's true. No one would believe it—that is all part of the muddle. I don't believe it myself. Not really. I tell myself I am nothing but a crazy old woman. Do you suppose I *am* crazy?"

"Aunty! Don't be ridiculous!"

She looked relieved, but almost at once she asked me if I had heard the clock strike. "Is it dinnertime? I do wish Randall weren't always so late."

The night before, in the drawing room, I could have wept for Gregory, so bitter and weary, and with all the youthfulness sponged from his face. Now I could have wept for Aunty.

When Gregory came home that evening, he flourished two tickets for a witty, sophisticated Sardou comedy everyone was discussing. I showed him my new hat, and tried it on, and he pronounced it a huge success. I drew his attention to the quince and plum blossoms, and he approved my choice of a vase.

He ordered a very special wine to be brought up from the cellar and cooled, and we had a gay little dinner. I was conscious of chatting on inconsequentially and rather rapidly, and of avoiding any chance of a lag in the conversation. When we finished our coffee, we went up to Aunty's room. She was asleep. Nellie was making up the couch in the dressing room for herself. She had brought her flannel nightgown, cap, wrapper, and crocheted slippers down from the attic. Devoted, reliable Nellie.

We left for the theater with the comfortable feeling

Aunty could not be in better hands. The play was daringly risqué, but it entertained us, and when we promenaded in the lobby between acts, Gregory's face had relaxed. His mouth and his bright, dark eyes were amused. The evening was everything he had wanted it to be, I saw gratefully, and some of my own tension lessened.

When Wrenn had driven us home, we had chicken sandwiches and a glass or two of champagne in the drawing room. Gregory had arranged it. The whole evening had been a kind of little gala. I knew we would be lovers when we went to our room. Lightly, gaily amorous, with everything that was ugly deliberately put away from us, and buried. *Buried*, though, was in itself an ugly word. *Forgotten* or *ignored* was infinitely preferable.

When we got to the upstairs hall, we stopped at Aunty's closed door. "Shall we go in?" Gregory suggested in a whisper. "We would be better satisfied, I think." Very quietly he turned the doorknob, and we slipped into Aunty's bedroom. The door to the dressing room was open. We heard Nellie snoring. Aunty was snoring also. Her breathing worried me with its heavy unevenness, and her face had a pinched look to it. "Should I stay with her, do you think?" I asked uneasily. "Should we send Wrenn for Dr. Mason?"

Gregory hesitated. "I hardly know what to say. But why not go to bed, darling, and I'll just sit here a few minutes and see how things go. It's a pity to get Dr. Mason out this late unnecessarily."

I was enormously relieved to see him sit down by the bed. The little night taper on the bedside table was a pale flicker in the darkness. The wind bells, tinkling in the draft from the open hall door, were much too loud. I wondered, foolishly, whether Aunty were hearing them. I hoped not,

and I was glad the finches were asleep, with their heads under their wings.

"Good night, Aunty dear," I whispered, and then I tip-toed out of the room.

I undressed, wearily conscious of the day's having been extraordinarily long. I slipped my nightgown over my head, tied the blue satin ribbons of my peignoir, and brushed my hair; then I picked up a book and made a pretense of reading in an armchair by the hearth while I dozed fitfully and waited for Gregory.

"Is Aunt Edith still asleep?" I asked anxiously when he came in.

"Yes."

"Is her breathing quieter?"

"Much quieter."

"We needn't send for Dr. Mason?"

"Not until Wrenn is up and has had his breakfast. I've written a note for him and left it on the kitchen table."

"But should we leave Aunty alone?"

"The dressing-room door is ajar—I saw to that—and Nellie could hear the slightest sound if Aunt Edith stirs. But we shall have to get a nurse soon, whether we like it or not, I'm afraid. Aunt Edith ought to have proper round-the-clock care, and we can't expect it of Nellie, no matter how well we pay her."

Gregory was undressing. His mouth was grim as he took out his cuff links and studs. "A pity Aunt Edith's voice couldn't have gone, instead of her legs. I'd feel safer."

"So would I." I began to cry exhaustedly, ashamedly. "I'm afraid, Greg. I'm afraid!" I sobbed.

I saw Randall grilled on a witness stand. I saw his long stretched-out length dangling, twisting, at the end of a rope. I saw Wrenn on the stand, giving evidence. I saw Gregory,

"an accessory to a felony," swearing to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, concerning the secret illegal burial of a strangled pregnant housemaid.

The finish of Randall, yes, and the finish of Wrenn's hideous hold upon us, but the finish, too, of Gregory. Proud Gregory, with his high head brought low.

He took me in his arms. "You are trembling, and I can feel your heart. What cowards we are, both of us. Oh, my sweet. My love." He murmured the private endearments of all our nights. He comforted me and warmed me with his nearness. After a time his steady quiet breathing told me he was asleep. I envied him his oblivion, his respite. The grimness had gone from his mouth. His lips curved a little with the suggestion of a smile.

With Gregory gone from me into sleep, terror rushed back like a battering wave. A harsh breath of salt and kelp invaded the bedroom. The sea had found entrance, and Rosie's sprawled dead body.

In panic, I whispered a desperate prayer for Gregory and for me, and I prayed for Aunty through a slowly creeping dawn light that blurred the bedroom like sea mist. "Don't let her dream, God," I implored. "Let her only sleep."

Imploringly, then, I cried out to someone else. "Kuan Yin! Kuan Yin!" Because she, too, benign and merciful and mysterious, was suddenly another tenant of the bedroom, with the white smoothness of her blanc de chine the white smoothness of Rosie's arms, and the dawn light that showed her to me no longer gray sea mist, but incense, blowing East.

xx 18

"MISS LILAS! Mr. Gregory!

I struggled awake from a heavy, drowning sleep to hear Nellie's urgent, agitated voice, her hard pounding on the bedroom door. Gregory was sitting up in bed. "Yes? Yes?"

"Oh, sir, it's Miss Spencer. She's—she's—I can't wake her, Mr. Gregory."

Gregory was dragging on a dressing gown, and I was out of bed beside him, fumbling dazedly with the ribbons of my peignoir. I heard his quick "Send Wrenn for the doctor," and then we raced down the hall and burst into Aunty's room. She had toppled slightly sideways from the piled pillows, and her right arm was thrown out stiffly over the edge of the bed. We knew at once she was dead. Her eyes were open and staring. The hands we touched were cold. I dropped down by the bed and put my arms around the rigid form that was all we had left of her. "Aunty. Aunty."

I couldn't believe she wouldn't answer. I couldn't believe

she would never again need the night taper that still flickered on the bedside table, or her little silver call bell, or that she would never again demand a chocolate from the big box she loved to rifle.

Gregory was looking at Aunty, silent and sorry. Gently he closed the fixed, empty eyes staring up at us and drew the embroidered linen blanket cover over Aunty's face. "She had to go sometime, Lilas," he reminded me quietly. "Be glad it was now."

I knew all too well what he meant. And I was glad—for her sake. To sleep, but not to dream. And in my heart I was glad for Gregory's and my own sake. To sleep—and not to talk. Never to talk dangerously.

"If only we had been with her when she went," I whispered. "If only she had not been alone."

"I know. I know. I keep wishing it, too. But she was so quiet, Lilas, when I left her, so quiet and still."

We heard horses and a carriage coming up the hill and a subdued flurry and murmur of voices at the front door, and then Dr. Mason hurried into the bedroom.

"Nellie found her, did she?" he asked as he put his black satchel on the foot of Aunty's bed and drew down the blanket cover. "She came in at six to close the windows and light the fire, she says. Hm. Well, then, just let me see."

A few minutes later he shut his satchel. The brass catch snapped loudly, decisively, in the quiet, queerly empty room that belonged to no one now. "Your aunt died at approximately two or three o'clock, as nearly as I can judge."

"I was sitting with her until two, Dr. Mason," Gregory said.

"I should say, then, she went shortly after."

Gregory's sorry dark eyes went to the bed. "Lilas very

much regrets Aunt Edith was alone," he said slowly. "I should have stayed. I should have realized."

Dr. Mason put a hand on Gregory's sleeve. "You had no way of knowing when it would come. Your aunt died of a heart seizure, my boy, which is what I've been expecting. Only the most immediate medical attention could possibly have saved her. You've nothing to reproach yourself for. Just be grateful your aunt went in her sleep, peacefully."

I looked at the still figure on the bed. "We moved her," I heard myself saying. "She had fallen to the side of the bed. She—she wasn't like this. Her arm was flung out."

"You are afraid she may have tried to ring her bell and couldn't reach it?" Dr. Mason's bluntness put in words, exactly what was responsible, I was certain, for much of the sober regret in Gregory's eyes.

"You mustn't allow yourself to be morbid, child." Dr. Mason put a hand on my arm, as he had on Gregory's. "Your aunt's reaching out was a matter of reflexes, very likely. It happens. But there's no need to go into post-mortem details."

He picked up his bag. "I've lost a very good, very old friend, my dears. Edith Spencer was a fine woman. It's too bad Randall hasn't seen more of her these past years. I'm glad he came home when he did. I remember how devoted Edith was to him as a child. She loved all of you, but—"

"Next to Lilas, he was her favorite, and her devotion to him never stopped," Gregory commented levelly.

He drew me away from the bed. "Go and dress. Ask Nellie to have coffee sent up. You need it, and so do I. I'll come when Dr. Mason and I have discussed funeral arrangements."

Obediently I left Aunty and went to our bedroom and opened an armoire. "Something suitable, out of respect for Aunty, who is dead," I thought dully.

A tray came from the kitchen, and then Nellie helped me rip the elaborate blonde lace collar and sleeve ruffles from a gray surah silk, and I sent Norah off in a cab with a note to my dressmaker and to Madame Delphine; she was to bring back a selection of black dresses and hats and crepe veils. They were to please quickly shop for black stockings and black shoes, size five, and for black-bordered handkerchiefs.

When Gregory came in, he dismissed Nellie and I poured him a cup of coffee. He drank it by the windows that looked down on the harbor and the wharves. "We shall have to let Randall come to pay his last respects to Aunt Edith," he told me unwillingly. "There's no way out."

"No, I suppose not."

"I've already sent a note to the dock. Dr. Mason obviously expected it. And we shall have to put up with him in the pew at Trinity, and on the drive to Laurel Hill."

After our coffee we went down to the kitchen and talked to Lew and Sang about Aunty. Each of them had been in her house longer than we.

When that was over, Nellie and I tidied Aunty's bedroom.

Nellie's grief was expressed in a series of doleful useless laments. "If only she'd rung her bell! If only she'd called out."

"She couldn't, Nellie. I've told you and told you. She didn't have the strength."

And because Greg and I were cowards, she hadn't had a nurse sitting by her bed, guessing her every need, listening to her every breath.

But regrets and self-reproaches always come too late.

"Uncover the birds," I told Nellie. "Feed them. Clean their cage. Set out their bath water."

"You mean, Miss Lilas, the same as usual?"

"Yes," I said unsteadily. "The same as usual."

Aunty would want her birds to sing. I wished I dare pull up the heavy window blinds and let the sun in, and that the house need not wear so somber a look for the benefit of callers and passers-by.

I went to the bedside table and took away a carafe of water and a drinking glass and Aunty's candy box. I smoothed and straightened the lace-edged linen cover and neatly aligned the night taper, Aunty's spectacles, the little silver bell she hadn't rung, and her Bible.

A world without Aunty. It was inconceivable.

The morning dragged on. The house was hushed. The maids tiptoed and whispered. Wrenn ran errands. I didn't see him.

Quiet unctuous men appeared and went into Aunty's room, closing the door behind them. When they went away, the neatly arranged pink-cheeked nonentity in black faille they left against fresh unwrinkled pillow cases had no relation to Aunty.

Sprays and wreaths and crosses of stiff ugly flowers arrived, bringing an unnatural, sickening smell into the house. Carriages drove up, and notes and cards overflowed a silver bowl on the hall table.

When Gregory's tailor had come with a black tie and sewn a mourning band on his sleeve, Gregory went down-stairs to receive callers. Later in the afternoon I joined him. Aunty would have wanted me to see dear Judge and Mrs. Kingston.

The Judge was kind, and sincerely sorry. Mrs. Kingston

patted my hand, and used her handkerchief, and said she didn't know what in the world she was going to do without her best friend.

And then Randall walked into the drawing room. Like Gregory, he wore a black tie and a mourning band.

Judge and Mrs. Kingston left. For appearances sake Gregory and I waited in the drawing room until Randall came down again. Lew, padding about, pulling the shades now, and lighting the lamps, stirring the fire, must be considered, and Norah, too, at the front door, with a card tray in her hand, ready to open for the next callers.

We had not expected Randall to accept the glass of port Lew offered when he appeared again.

Gregory's lips tightened, and I began picking at the edges of my new black-bordered handkerchief as he sat down and stretched his long legs to the hearth.

The two men made desultory meaningless conversation until Lew finally left the room, and then Randall turned to me. "Old Kingston took care of Aunty's will, I suppose? And she left everything to you, did she, Lilas?"

All three of us had known she would, ever since we were children. Aunty had been entirely frank about her stubborn conviction that the fortune her father had accumulated and passed on to her should, in turn, come to another Spencer woman, intact. She had made it clear to both boys that fundamentally they had their own way to make in the world, but with an opening for each of them in Spencer and Company if they chose to take it. And there would be allowances for them until they were grown. After that, if they went into Spencer and Company, excellent salaries, depending on how high they climbed, and bonuses each year the company made a profit.

When I married Gregory, I begged Aunty to change her

will. I didn't want all the shares in Spencer and Company for myself. I didn't want her personal fortune. It wasn't fair to Gregory, and it would be awkward, having so much more than my husband. Even the far too generous drawing account she had given me since my debut would be an embarrassment, I protested.

Aunty stood firm. "My will is my own affair, child. Dear Papa always felt the girls in a family needed looking after, and I know precisely how he would like his money passed along."

That was the end of it. She wouldn't listen to arguments, and so I tried not to feel self-conscious, and I even learned to laugh when Gregory made his fond, teasing jokes about my being parsimonious, and urged me to indulge myself in clothes and furs and jewels.

To have Randall bring up the subject of Aunty's money now, only hours after she had died, was something else. He was barbarous. Impossible.

"Had you hoped for a change of heart on Aunt Edith's part?" Gregory put in with swift sarcasm. "A handing out of *pourboires* all around? Surely, Randall, you wouldn't want Lilas to lose out, especially now, with China having made you a man of substance?"

"I should not want Lilas to lose out under any circumstances. Nor, in any way." Randall lifted his wine glass. "To the heiress! My congratulations. And may she have a long life to enjoy her riches. Tell me, Cousin Lilas, how will you go about spending them? What will you buy first? Too bad the *Star* isn't for sale: she was always what you wanted most to own, I remember."

With my eyes on the handkerchief I was shredding, I wondered remotely, irrelevantly, whether Nellie would

be able to mend it. She would wonder what on earth had happened to it.

"Desires change," I managed.

"They do indeed—in some instances, at any rate. They can come and go like—well, shall I say, tidewater? And it seems one can never be entirely certain what will wash away or what will stay." Randall put his glass on a table and stood up. "Before I go, can you tell me about services for Aunt Edith?"

"Trinity Church on Wednesday morning at ten o'clock, and then the vault at Laurel Hill." Gregory's reply was brief, terse.

"With the three of us together in the front pew, and the three of us in the carriage, is that what you have in mind?"

"Yes."

"Precisely what Aunt Edith would have wanted; her devoted niece, her devoted nephews. Devoted to her, devoted to each other." The silent insolent laughter in Randall's eyes was more of a taunt even than his words.

Gregory's thin dark face was a mask of containment. "I'll ring for Norah to show you out."

The front door had barely closed after him before I threw myself into Gregory's arms. "What does he mean to do to us? What will the end be? Oh, Gregory, Gregory! I hate him! I detest him."

"Wait—wait, Lilas. Don't let Norah hear you. We'll go upstairs."

I collapsed on the bed when we reached our room. I was sick with revulsion. Sick with terror. Gregory got me into a dressing gown, and took the pins from my hair, and brushed and plaited it. He dampened his big handkerchief with cologne and put it on my fearfully throbbing temples.

He would not let me talk. "Lie still," he commanded. "Forget Randall. You have got to forget him. And Lilas, sweet, forget Aunt Edith, too, now, for the night. You need to rest. You have been so good. You have been so brave."

I clung tightly to his hand, like a child, while he sat by the bed. When Lew struck the dinner gong in the down-stairs hall at seven o'clock, I clutched tighter. "Don't leave me, Greg."

"I have no intention of it, my foolish girl. We will have our dinner sent up. No, don't say you can't eat. You must."

I had soup and a piece of French bread, and the glass of Chablis Gregory insisted upon. I felt better. I was ashamed of my lack of self-control, with Gregory so close, the bedroom so bright with lamplight and hearth glow.

Too crimson, yes. But most women would envy me. Rich, deep carpet. Rich satins and velvets. A dressing table littered with a silver toilet set, and scent bottles, and a powder jar. There was an ivory box, too.

I wished I had put it out of sight, or better yet, thrown it away when it was first given me. Why had I kept it even for a minute? What did I want of a Chinese box that caught my eye so frequently, only to upset me?

Gregory was reading aloud to me from the *Atlantic*, his pleasant voice a soporific. When he thought I was asleep, he turned out the lights and got into bed next to me. But I heard the soughing of the wind, and smelled the sea. I began to tremble.

Suddenly, with my nightgown drenched with perspiration, I was sitting upright, rigid, staring through the darkness to the windows. "The cove—the cove!" I cried out, terrified. "The rocks! The rocks and the tide! And Rosie! Greg! Greg! Close the shutters. Quickly. Oh, Greg! Don't you hear? It's Rosie. I can't bear it. I can't bear it."

"Lilas. Hush. Hush, darling. You're dreaming." Gregory reached out swiftly for a match. He struck it, and the globe above the bed began to hiss and flare.

"It's not a dream! It was Rosie! I heard her, I tell you, Rosie, at the cove. . . ."

"Stop, Lilas. Stop! That's enough." Gregory seized me and pinioned my arms to my sides. "The cove is an obsession with you. God, if only I knew how to drive it out of your mind!"

His dark concerned eyes searched mine desperately. "If only I knew how to make you see it as it really is, the true cove. Rosie isn't there, my darling. The cove is just the cove; its rocks are the rocks we used to climb as children. The tide is the same tide that washed around our legs when we waded."

His face was white and strained in the lamplight, haggard almost, with intensity. "It's horrible—preposterous—this mania of yours. The cove. Always the cove. And it's only a half-moon of sand and rocks, no different than a hundred others. You will make yourself ill unless you recognize it for yourself—you are half ill already, letting a gull's cry get at you so. Because that was all you heard. A gull. I told you the same thing before. This time you have got to believe me. Say you do, Lilas. Say it for both our sakes."

"It was only a gull. . . ." I repeated, obedient and contrite. How wretchedly troubled he was, how anxious for me. I longed to reassure him, just as he had tried to reassure me when I started up in bed, staring and whimpering. That was what marriage was: two people wanting, always, to comfort each other, sustain each other. "If you took me to the cove tomorrow, Gregory, I could look down, I promise you, and see only children wading," I told him.

"A half-moon of shore, like a hundred others. That is all it is—nothing more."

Whether or not it satisfied him, he kissed me and turned out the lamp, and fell asleep, holding me.

I could still smell the sea.

The pull of imagined tides was as strong, as irresistible, as ever. Cautiously I freed myself from Gregory's arms and slipped out of bed to stand by an open window. The moment the smell of kelp and salt assaulted me, the incessant, rhythmic murmur of the wind deepened to the crash and wash, the crash and wash, of green combers against jagged rocks. Again, a gull's scream was something else, echoing from a fog-shrouded clifftop.

The fog was in tonight. Below the hill where bay water lapped at the dark bulk of wharves, cabin and fo'c'sle lights wore a pale, blurred nimbus. I tore my eyes away. But I saw another light, burning closer than any lantern aboard the *Star*; Wrenn, in his room above the stable, had not yet turned down his lamp. "It is late," I thought, "but no later than that other night when he waited for Rosie, who didn't come home."

Had he a bottle for company, I wondered? Or was the bottle empty, and Wrenn sodden on his bed? And if the horses stirred in the stalls below, would he be reminded in his drunken sleep of a dawn drive eight years ago?

I shivered in my thin nightdress and crept back to bed. Gregory stirred, and turned. Remorsefully, I knew I had wakened him. Neither of us slept after that, except for restless minutes at a time. And with each striking of the clock on the landing, I envied the still, unfamiliar form lying in Aunty's room, who had usurped Aunty's place against piled pillows, and whose slumber was so deep, so oblivious.

㉙ 19

IN SPITE OF a pouring rain, Trinity Church was crowded the morning of Aunty's funeral. Gregory and Randall and I followed the coffin down the aisle to the chancel rail, and seated ourselves in the first pew. I went in first. Gregory was next to me, Randall next to him. Dr. and Mr. ~~son~~, Judge and Mrs. Kingston, the maids, Wrenn, and ~~Lew~~ and Sang, were just back of us. I was aware of more flowers, more sprays and wreaths and crosses, stiff and ugly on their wire frames and easels, their heavy scent tainted with a hint of wilt and decay. My thick crepe veil and my black gloves had a newly bought smell equally as funereal.

Gregory opened a prayer book, and we each held a corner of it and followed the service, kneeling on crimson velvet hassocks. ". . . Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts . . ." Randall, down one from Gregory, was kneeling, but he had not opened a prayer book, and his lips were not moving.

"... in the midst of life, we are in death. . . ." It had been true for Aunty. Doubly true for Rosie, who had been young. I glanced quickly, stealthily, at Randall again, and looked away.

We walked behind the coffin again and out of the church. Gregory held an umbrella over me as he helped me into a funeral carriage. The sound of the rain on the plumed hearse was a dirge.

Neither Gregory nor I nor Randall spoke a word on the slow, interminable drive to the cemetery. We stood at the bronze gate of the Spencer vault under a hastily stretched, leaking canvas while more prayers were said, and then we got into the rain-splashed, mud-spattered carriage again. We rode in silence back to the house, and when Gregory and I got out, Randall, formally courteous, walked to the front door with us. And then, on the marble steps, he spoke for the first time that morning, with his glance going from the lawn with its iron mastiffs to the rain-drenched pink begonias in their iron urns, from lace-curtained bay windows to cupola. "Aunt Edith's house—without Aunt Edith—is hard to imagine." He put out a hand and touched one of mine lightly, briefly. "I prefer not to try, as I expect you do, Lilas."

Norah, back from church and changed into her parlor-maid apron and streamered cap, saved me from the necessity of any answer by opening the front door.

Tears were suddenly stinging my eyes. Randall's phrasing had made Aunty's death a reality. Instead of taking refuge in Gregory's and my room, I flung myself on Aunty's bed to weep uncontrollably.

When Gregory came upstairs and found me crying, he tried to reason with me. "Aunt Edith was incurably ill," he reminded me gently "Bedridden. Senile. Even if we had

no other reason to be thankful she is gone, isn't that enough? But we had another reason. And so admit it to yourself: you are glad."

"I'm not. I'm not." I sobbed it rebelliously, and pulled away from Gregory's arms.

"But you are, Lilas, in your heart. How can you help but be? How can either of us? And can you say with any honesty you want her back?"

Slowly, my weeping lessened. I bathed my face and tidied my hair. Judge Kingston lunched with Gregory and me and then we went into the library and he read us Aunty's will.

She had left substantial sums to favorite charities and to her church. Annuities to Sang and Lew and Nellie and Teena "for good and faithful services, and because they were my friends." Norah and the gardener were well remembered.

Wrenn was mentioned as having "already received appropriate remuneration."

The remainder of the estate was mine. All of it. Aunty's house and her jewels, her mining and bank stocks, as well as her shares in Spencer and Company. It came to a great deal, and I looked helplessly at Judge Kingston and then at Gregory. "What shall I do with it?" I asked. "There is too much."

Simultaneously they exchanged amused glances. Judge Kingston folded Aunty's will back into its stiff legal envelope. "You will find plenty of ways to spend your money, my dear, if you are like most women," he observed dryly "Shopping and junkets, here, there, and everywhere."

"And I can see you being a Lady Bountiful, and giving it all away unless you're forcibly restrained." Gregory put

in teasingly. "She's much too soft-hearted for her own good. We shall have to watch her."

The two of them began to discuss court procedures for the probating of the will.

"Aunt Edith's house—without Aunt Edith." Tears crowded my eyes again. All the mockery, all falseness, all cruelty, had gone from Randall's face when he spoke those few poignant words. Inexplicably he had called a truce. For the brief moment his gray eyes swept the house, the brief, surprising instant his hand had reached out to touch mine, I had known what he was trying to say: "Aunt Edith was Aunt Edith. Her going has left a gap. No one can fill it. Nothing will ever be the same. Not to you, Lilas, nor to me, who both loved her."

And the old Randall *had* loved her, in spite of his rebelliousness, his stormy battle to be Randall, no one but Randall.

I got up and excused myself to Judge Kingston and Gregory on the plea of a headache. It was an effort to climb the stairs. They had never loomed as steep, as tall. I held tightly to the banister, and when I toiled to the top, I looked down with an involuntary shudder at the waxed gleam of parquetry floors, the rich dark oblongs of Oriental rugs, so far below.

Down, down, onto rocks.

The horror that filled me was second, then, to flooding shame as I felt again the brief touch of Randall's hand against mine. Even through my gloves there had been something—a tingle. It had not only been because of unexpected quick-starting tears that I had hurried wordlessly through the door Norah held open.

I stood for a long moment at the top of the stairs,

rubbing my right hand as though to rid it of a stain. "I will wash it," I thought, and I went along to our bathroom and ran hot water in the basin. "If there were an actual stain, Gregory would say it was a contamination from a murderer's hand," I told myself. I scrubbed my hands with soap, dried them, and rubbed them with lotion, but the tingling that had been transmitted through a pair of new black suede gloves, worn for Aunty, who was dead, did not go away.

㉚ 20

A WEEK AFTER Aunty's funeral Judge Kingston arranged a meeting with me in his office to discuss the legal formalities of probating her will. It sounded formidable. I was certain none of it would be intelligible to me. I knew nothing about money, except the spending of it. The men in one's family looked after such things. Or if one hadn't a father or a brother or a husband, lawyers like Judge Kingston managed everything.

"Come with me, Greg, won't you?" I asked it at breakfast the morning of my appointment. We had come down early to what I could only think of as Aunty's dining room. How could it possibly be mine? How could so bewildering a metamorphosis have taken place in just these few days? Wasn't our coffee being poured from Aunty's big silver pot? Wasn't our toast in the silver rack she had brought home from England when we went to meet Gregory, that had pleased her so because the man in the Bond Street shop

had assured her, "Yes, Madam, the Queen undoubtedly has one similar"?

Our honey was in her favorite cut-glass jar with the silver bee on its lid. The oranges we were peeling were out of Aunty's prized Imari bowl that was always on the sideboard full of fruit: oranges, apples, bananas in winter and spring; peaches, pears, plums, apricots, figs, grapes in summer and fall. "Yes, you may help yourselves, children, but please use your finger bowls. That's what they are on the table for; fruit stains are very difficult to remove from Aunty's napkins."

"What will Judge Kingston want of me?" I questioned nervously. "It will all be Greek. Must I go?"

"A lawyer's jargon would be Greek to any woman, darling. And of course you must go, and I shall go with you if you think it would make it any easier."

"I'll feel ever so much better." I gave a relieved sigh. "But I still don't see why you and the lawyers can't just go ahead and look after things."

"Judge Kingston needs your signature, darling." Gregory put down his newspaper to patiently explain. "You will have to sign and sign until your hand cramps," he warned me with a teasing smile. "There will be documents piled to the ceiling on the Judge's desk. Ah, that wasn't kind of me, was it? Don't look so alarmed! It won't be that bad. All you will have to do is pretend you read whatever he puts in front of you, and nod very wisely. 'Yes, Judge Kingston, yes, I see,' and then sign again. Though of course when that is done, you will have to talk about making your will."

"My will?" Only old people made wills, I had thought.

"You are an heiress, aren't you, sweet? That's why I

married you—remember? Of course you have to make a will."

With the teasing still in his eyes, he went back to his newspaper. As I poured cream in my coffee I thought, there was too much of Aunty's money, now, with only Gregory and I left to spend it. Too much even for extravagantly living Spencers like ourselves.

Clothes—beautiful clothes. The upkeep of a big house. The carriage and pair. Entertaining—food and wine and flowers and music. Servants to be paid. It all cost a great deal, and yet so much was left over. There would be even more from now on: Gregory's ambitions for Spencer and Company were unbounded.

More money to spend? But what would we buy? What did we want? Reluctantly, I acknowledged to myself that Gregory wanted everything he saw. Everything of worth, rather. Everything that was fine or rare or that bespoke the connoisseur.

He was even talking about an estate in San Mateo. "Why should we go to hotels every summer?" he had asked me. "Why don't we build, and have exactly what we want? A house to frame you, darling. A house suitable for my wife?"

Inwardly I smiled a little ruefully. I was used to knowing how Gregory thought of me: his carefully chosen, deliberately acquired Lilas, complementing him, adorning his life. A possession. The subtly exhibited evidence of his perfect taste.

But that was Gregory. And was introspection ever wise? I seemed to be making a habit of it lately.

I was still telling myself this when Wrenn drove the carriage around from the stable yard to take us downtown.

At first sight of him, thick necked and coarse faced, his

veined nose giving away his tippling habits as obviously as the reek on his breath—a reek at ten o'clock in the morning—utter revulsion seized me. And then, illogically, I was moved with something almost like pity.

True, it had been a monstrous Wrenn, a degraded unnatural Wrenn who had dug Rosie's grave, but who was I to sit in judgment? I was Mrs. Gregory Spencer with so much money I didn't know what to do with it. How could I begin to understand the strength of the temptation that had made him listen to Aunty's pleading? How could I have any conception of his greedy compulsions when "a cottage and a piece of land" and lifelong security were in his grasp? "Rosie is dead," he would have reasoned. "And a grave is a grave—so why not?"

Even though Rosie wasn't his own daughter, mustn't he have felt some degree of attachment to her? Why else had he bothered with her when her mother died? An orphanage would have taken her in; of course he had cared.

Did he ever think of Rosie any more? My hands were icy inside my gloves as I asked it. If a man had a stepdaughter and if he cared, only a little, only perfunctorily, and if the stepdaughter were seduced—murdered . . .

Wrenn had raised his whip once already, looking for revenge. And Wrenn drank. How easily there could be a second time if whisky made him forget his avarice and remember only one thing: Master Randall was back.

My thoughts were racing to the Embarcadero. "Greg?"
"Yes?"

"Have you heard any mention of the *Star*? Any waterfront news of when she might clear port?"

"How could anyone know what our charming cousin has in mind? And why do you ask?"

"I was only wondering, only hoping."

"He'll go when he is ready, and not a day sooner; make up your mind to that. But need we discuss either him or his ship? I prefer not to, if you have no objections, Lilas."

I had provoked him. His face wore a cold, closed look. But when the carriage lurched suddenly as the horses clopped along over the cobbles, and I was thrown against him, he put a steady arm around me. I was grateful for his nearness, as I was always grateful for it, and for his quick smile, intimately sweet, that spoke regret for his curtness.

When Wrenn pulled up in front of the building where Judge Kingston had his office, Gregory took my arm. "Shall we go in and get it over with? You look white! Good heavens, Lilas, this isn't going to be trial by fire."

Judge Kingston seated us opposite him across a cluttered roll-top desk, and ordered a law clerk to open the big iron safe that took up most of the room. "Now, then." He settled his pince-nez and brought out a sheaf of papers that stuffed a walrus-hide portfolio.

"Just read this, my dear Lilas, and this, and this. And then if you will sign your name here. And here again on the top line."

I glanced at Gregory, and we laughed. My hand *would* be cramped by the time the last paper was signed.

When I had finished and the papers were back in the safe, Judge Kingston dismissed the clerk and settled back in his black leather and oak swivel chair. "Well, young lady, that's done. The rest is up to the Probate Court. And now we can get down to the matter of your will. I expect Gregory told you that's the real reason I wanted you to come in as soon as you felt up to it? People dodge making wills; I see too many of them putting it off. Women, espe-

cially. And I don't approve. I like to see my clients' affairs in order. Now, in your case, Lilas, to begin with, I presume you'd want to provide for very much the same sort of charitable bequests Miss Edith made, and something generous for your servants?"

"Yes, certainly."

"And after that?"

"I don't know," I confessed. "It's all too much." I was protesting as I had protested before. "I haven't the least idea what to do with it." I leaned forward in my chair, worriedly. "I don't know a thing about business affairs, Judge Kingston. But it's not right, at all right, for me to own Spencer and Company. Gregory should have the controlling shares. He *is* Spencer and Company. So when the court turns the shares over to me, couldn't I just give them to Gregory?"

Gregory laughed. "My wife is a rather lavish gift-giver, wouldn't you say, sir?" He put out his hand to Judge Kingston. "Why don't I just go along to my office and let you and Lilas settle things? It's up to her to do what she likes with her money, of course, but don't let too many rash ideas run away with her."

When he had gone, Judge Kingston frowned thoughtfully, and made a church steeple out of his hands, and rested his long bony chin on it. "You meant it about turning over those shares, my dear? I shall want to consider the matter very carefully before I let you go ahead. It would be extremely generous of you, but after all, you've got your mining and banking stock. And naturally, any man in Gregory's position would like nothing better than to own the controlling shares in a family business he has developed so successfully. And to some one of Gregory's particular make-up, a good deal of pride would enter in.

The top of the ladder—he's been climbing toward it since he was knee high. I'm not criticizing—but I wasn't entirely in accord with your aunt's wishes. Those Spencer shares could have gone to Gregory and you would still have had money to burn."

He hesitated. "Miss Edith drew this last will at the time of your marriage. Frankly, I was surprised at her leaving Randall out as completely as Gregory. Gregory had his salary and his bonuses—remember, they weren't small by any means—and a limitless future ahead of him."

"Randall could have gone into Spencer and Company, too if he'd chosen, Judge Kingston. He had the same opportunities."

"I know, my dear. But he didn't choose. I'd have thought your Aunt would have made it up to him. Not that Randall needs any of her money. I hear he's done very well. But circumstances being what they were, and considering his background . . ."

Randall's background? I was a child again, in a nursery, staring round-eyed at a thin-faced eight-year-old boy in shabby jacket and breeches, with darned black stockings wrinkling on his long skinny legs.

"Where did he come from?" I asked quietly. "Aunty didn't seem to want to discuss it. He just appeared one day."

"There was a good deal of bitterness and hard feeling mixed up in it. All of it goes back a long way. Randall's grandfather and Miss Edith were to be married—the perfect couple, everyone thought—and then if one of her own bridesmaids didn't break it up!"

"Oh, no! How terrible for her!"

"My wife gets up in arms about it to this day. You can imagine the talk, the papers. 'SHIPPING HEIRESS LEFT AT

ALTAR,' that sort of thing. She was a great belle, you know. Very popular, and very 'first family' of course. The papers couldn't have asked for better. The public read about her for weeks. Her Worth wedding dress, the presents that had to be returned—the ring that went back."

"It's too cruel!" I could see now why Aunty had begged Wrenn to do what he did and promised him any amount of money: Those newspapers—those fiendish newspapers that had torn her into pieces once. How could anyone expect her to face that again, knowing it would be a thousand times worse.

"What did she do? How could she stand it?"

"Her parents were alive then, and they took her abroad. And then a year or two later she came back. She had courage, and she had good friends. But she never looked at another man. And then when Randall's father was born, well, I guess that hurt pretty much, too, knowing the boy could have been her own."

"Did he grow up here in San Francisco?"

"Yes. And by the time he was twenty-two or three, his name, too, got in the papers. That was when Randall's mother had come along."

"Who—who was she?"

Judge Kingston looked at me, mildly surprised. "You hadn't heard? I suppose not, though. After all, it's past history. But at any rate, she was a little half-wild Spanish thing, a mining-camp girl, from up Grass Valley way. Randall's father met her one summer on a trip to the Empire diggings. He fell in love with her, and he wouldn't give her up no matter what his parents had to say. He married her in some out-of-the-way mountain church, and they cut him off. There was another Roman holiday when the papers got hold of it."

"What was the girl like? Did you ever see her?"

"Only once. Randall's father wouldn't set foot in San Francisco once his parents turned thumbs down on his wife. He hadn't a cent of his own, and took up prospecting. He kept at it hard enough, but nothing panned out. And then he died of typhoid."

"How long had they been married?"

"Eight years. And I was sitting right here at this desk when the girl walked in a week later. She had married when she was sixteen, and she could have passed for it still. Or maybe eighteen, let's say, but not a day over. She told me she had been burned up with fever herself for days, and knew she was going to die. She had gotten out of bed—they'd been living in some sort of shack they had built, back in the hills—and walked to the nearest stagecoach stop, and sold her wedding ring for a ticket down and enough over for the night's stay in an Eddy Street rooming house. How she dragged herself to my office, I'll never know."

Judge Kingston's eyes were reminiscent. "A little starved-looking thing. And then she told me she had a son. That was why she had come. Her son. A Spencer."

"How did she know about you?"

"Randall's father had told her I was a family friend and that I had tried to patch things up with his parents before they washed their hands of him. Which was true enough. I'd taken it on myself to mediate, you might say. Not that there was any real chance of things working out, but I felt it a duty. I don't like family splits. They're senseless things. But they do happen."

"Yes. Yes, they do. What did you do for the girl, Judge Kingston?"

"I drove her back in a hack to her roominghouse and

sent the woman who kept it for a doctor and a nurse. And I told her to bring a priest. Not that I hold with popery, but, well, I'll put it this way: I know what's right—and that little Spanish creature out of the hills had gotten under my skin. Those big sick eyes of hers—she was all eyes. And the way she kept saying, '*Gracias, señor, muchas gracias*' when I told her not to worry about the boy."

"He was at the roominghouse?"

"Yes. And as starved-looking as his mother." Judge Kingston pulled at an ear emphatically. "I tell you, Lilas, I'd sooner forget than not what it was like when his mother died that night. Typhus can go fast at the end, you know. At any rate, I pried him loose from her—and got him to stop crying. And I arranged for a funeral."

"What about the boy—about Randall, I mean?"

"I took him home with me. His father's people were dead. He didn't have a connection in the world—except your aunt. I got to thinking about that. She had taken you and Gregory in a few years earlier, so why not Randall, who wasn't just a homeless Spencer, but could have been her grandson. Her own grandson. And do you know what she said when I put it up to her? 'Where is he? When may I bring him here?' Your aunt was a very wonderful woman. I never saw a finer. And from that day on it was the three Spencer cousins she was bringing up. Quite a story, when you think of it."

"Yes. Yes, it is—I had wondered."

Some of it was not clear yet. I stood up, and Judge Kingston escorted me to Aunty's carriage. My carriage. I must learn to say it. "We'll talk about that will of yours, and those shares for Gregory, another day soon, shall we, my dear? Just be sure you know what you want, and I'll attend to it. Gregory is a lucky man to have a wife like you.

But then, he has always been lucky. Things have always worked out well for him. He seems to be that sort of person." Judge Kingston laughed with indulgent affection. "I don't suppose he'd have allowed himself to be any other."

I told Wrenn "home," and then as the horses moved along, I thought about Randall's grandfather. Had he been another dark thin-faced high-nosed Spencer with his head defiantly in the air? An arrogant willful Spencer, determined to get what he wanted, have what he wanted, at any cost? I wondered if he and Aunty's bridesmaid had found happiness after what they had done?

And then Aunty, carrying her head high, and doing her weeping behind closed doors.

Randall's father, too, had wanted his proud willful Spencer way. But he had not hurt anyone. Not in the same way, at least. Only by dying.

I tried to picture Aunty hearing about a homeless boy who could have been her grandson. I tried to picture the girl from Grass Valley.

Small wonder Randall had been on the defensive and his dark face full of resentment that first day when he stood in the doorway of our nursery. To him, Aunty and Gregory and I were only more Spencers ready to turn their backs, as other Spencers had turned their backs on his mother and father. At his age, a child knew more than people thought.

We had reached Nob Hill and I was getting out of the carriage when on an impulse I spoke to Wrenn. "Drive me back to Judge Kingston's office."

When I was seated in the black leather chair again and Judge Kingston and I were alone, with his shrewd, benevolent eyes on mine full of curiosity, I began hesitatingly,

"I began to think, when I left—there is a question I want to ask. Randall's mother, you said she was a mining-camp girl. Did you mean she was a—did you mean she was—bad?"

"Bad? A woman of the streets, is that what you're trying to say? Good Lord, Lilas, whatever put that in your head?" Judge Kingston stared at me through his steel-rimmed spectacles. "Of all the rubbish—the filthy rubbish! You don't think I'd have tried to mend matters for the family unless I'd made certain what sort of girl Randall's father was mixed up with, do you? Who told you such rotten nonsense about that little creature, I'd like to know?"

"I—I don't remember. It was a long time ago. I was only a child. But from the way you spoke of her, it sounded—mistaken. That's why I came back. It seemed—kinder—to ask, instead of to go on thinking . . ."

"A great deal kinder. She didn't deserve that sort of thing. I'm glad I could clear it up for you. I only hope Randall never got wind of it when he was a boy. A lie or not, it could have hurt."

Again Judge Kingston saw me to Aunty's carriage. I had upset him, I knew, and I was sorry. Sorry, and on my own account, troubled. "I shall ask Gregory about it," I promised myself on the way home. "Tonight I shall tell him how false and cruel a piece of gossip it was, and ask him where it started, how he got hold of it."

With a twinge of uneasiness I began to wonder how best to bring up the subject. Gregory would loathe any discussion involving Randall, and after all, what difference did it make whether or not he had once listened to unpleasant slander and believed it? "Things like that get around. Boys, older boys, hear them," he had told me. No doubt they did, but it was the greatest pity he should

have heard anything so—so smutty. Was I wise, though, to go into it with him now, when it was all a thing of the past?

In a way, of course, it did have a bearing on our lives—didn't it? A girl like that poor little creature was surely more desirable as a family connection than a—a what Gregory had called her. And Gregory, of all people, proud fastidious Gregory, would want to learn the truth about Randall's mother. To him, it should make an enormous difference.

It was not too difficult, looking at it that way, to justify my speaking out, but nevertheless, as it came time for Gregory's return from the office late that afternoon, I was again wondering just how to open the subject. Should I wait until we were at dinner and Gregory had relaxed over our roast and wine? No. Not in front of the servants. The library might be the best place. I would let Gregory find me there at my desk when he came home, and I would speak up casually, but without waste of time, and then it would be behind us.

The more I thought about telling him, the more the telling assumed the proportions of something to be gotten over with; and when the clock on the landing boomed six, I went downstairs with the greatest reluctance. With the pleated chiffon ruffles of one of my new black tea gowns trailing, I sat down at the tall walnut secretary where I wrote letters, looked over household accounts, and made out menus. I was writing busily when he came home.

"Letters, darling?" he asked me, kissing me.

"The last of our sympathy acknowledgments."

"Nothing I can take a hand to? Then I'll just have a look at these new listings." He picked up a London catalogue and settled himself in his chair.

How should I begin? And why should it seem so difficult? Why should I want to put it off? There was only one thing to do, plunge in before I lost my courage altogether.

"I wish you had stayed with me at Judge Kingston's this morning, Gregory."

"Hmm? What did you say?" Gregory was turning pages. "Stay? Why, sweetheart? Couldn't you and the Judge settle things satisfactorily?"

"Yes. It wasn't that. Greg, do you remember once, a very long time ago, telling me about Randall's mother?"

Gregory looked up, astonished, from his catalogue. His black brows lifted. "Randall's mother? Just when and why should I ever have brought her into our conversation?"

"You told me about her the day Aunty sent Randall away. You told me she was . . ." I played with my pen, not looking at him as I searched for a phrase. "You told me she was a woman of the streets."

"Did I? Then I expect it was something I felt you ought to know."

"But Judge Kingston says it isn't true. And I knew you would want to hear you were mistaken."

"How very thoughtful of you to have such wifely concern." The sarcasm in Gregory's voice made my eyes widen. "Did you really think, Lilas, that anything at all to do with Randall interests me?" Gregory had put down his catalogue. He was looking at me levelly, but a slow anger had kindled in his eyes. Unaccountably my heart began to beat a little too hard.

"How did you discover this calumny, as you say the Judge considers it?"

"I asked."

"Asked? You went to Judge Kingston with something as

intimate, something as much of a personal family matter as that?"

"But he was just the person *to ask*—he's as close as anyone we've got—closer, except for Dr. Mason. But none of it matters, Greg, it's not important."

"It does matter, Lilas." Gregory got up and stood with his back to the polished steel grate. For a moment I could see Randall; it was the way Randall had stood, waiting for us, in the drawing room, the night he had come back. But he had been smiling, coolly, brazenly, and Gregory's face was frighteningly stern. "I don't think I quite understand your way of looking at things, Lilas. You chose to go to the Judge instead of asking me your questions? And you prefer to take his word against mine? Rather a curious attitude for a wife. Not usual, certainly."

"But it came up entirely by accident. And why couldn't you have been mistaken, Gregory? You were only a boy. It would have been so easy to have heard the wrong thing about the wrong person. And I thought you would be relieved to know what Judge Kingston told me. Don't you see? It takes away a smirch. Poor girl, she——"

"Poor girl. So it's Randall's mother now who has your pity, as well as Randall himself?"

"You are not being fair. You won't let me finish. Judge Kingston knew her; he knew of her life before Randall's father married her."

"I don't doubt it. So did a great many other men."

"Greg!" I felt my cheeks burn.

Gregory smiled coldly. "Naïve Lilas. My innocent Lilas. I've told you before, you make me feel a thousand years old sometimes. This is one of those occasions."

"I'm not naïve. I'm not a child, as you seem to think. But that was an inexcusable thing to say." My voice shook

with indignation. "It was horrid of you. And I believe Judge Kingston."

"Oh, you do, do you? Very interesting, that." The anger in Gregory's eyes blazed. "You can sit there like a school-girl, fiddling with that pen of yours, and have the temerity to tell me I'm mistaken? Mistaken! The informed, infallible Judge Kingston's word over your husband's, is that it, Lilas?"

"Please, Gregory—don't look so angry. Please. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have told you. It was stupid of me. But I didn't do it for the sake of bringing up an unpleasantness. Truly I didn't. It only seemed——"

"Seemed what? Go on. I'm interested. Extremely interested."

"It only seemed kinder."

"Kinder?" I could never have imagined a word brought out so full of furious contempt. "And you think there could be any question of sympathy for Randall's mother—the mother of a murderer? She passed on her bad blood, and we've been paying for it ever since. You think she deserves kindness? Not from you nor from me, she doesn't. And in any case, your solicitude is misplaced. No decent person would waste a thought on her. But then, why try to argue that particular point? You don't believe me, so there is no use. But just let me make this quite clear, Lilas: if you must ask questions, come to me with them the next time, instead of going behind my back to an outsider. That I won't stand for."

Gregory's face paled as his anger mounted. His eyes, always dark, were black. "This continual digging up of everything that's buried! Can't I ever make you understand how distasteful it is? I've had enough. Years of knowing what Randall's mother was, and hearing other boys

snigger. Years of knowing what Randall himself is. Aunt Edith had enough, too. But would you let her alone? No. You had to nag and nag with those questions I begged you to drop. Do you think they helped matters? Helped Aunt Edith's peace of mind? Helped her physical condition? I am afraid not. Quite the contrary."

"Gregory!" I started up from the desk to drag at his arm beseechingly. "Don't say it! Don't say I made her worse."

"It's late, isn't it, Lilas, to think of that?"

His words cut as I had imagined Wrenn's whip would cut.

"But it isn't the issue, my dear girl. Shall we go back to the fascinating subject of Randall's mother? Fascinating to you, at least. Or would you rather drop the whole unsavory subject, and forget about the notorious, extremely clever prostitute who got a marriage license from Randall's drunken father? You don't look as though you cared to go on. No more questions? Could you by any chance be wishing you had left the matter closed? Personally, I should have thought it something to handle with tongs. I hadn't somehow expected my wife to dwell on it."

Gregory's mouth curled. "And now, if you have had quite enough, why not go upstairs? Shall I have dinner sent you? Neither of us, I think, will enjoy sitting at the table unless we can manage a pleasanter tête-à-tête than this has been."

He went to the table and picked up his catalogue again. I had been dismissed like a child, the child his sarcasm reduced me to, the child Aunty had always thought me, and I left the library without a word and trailed my black skirts up the stairs and along the upper hall to our bedroom.

Dismissed. A tray sent up. That was the way it had been night after night for the boy, Randall, who had once lived in this empty, vacated house where nothing existed any more, not even understanding between the two unreal people who were left behind. Unreal to me, at least. A Lilas and a Gregory I could not recognize.

I was too deeply hurt to cry, and I was ill with remorse. If Gregory were right, and I had made her dying all the harder for Aunty. . . . And he was right. *Nag* and *harass*. It was all I had done for days, with an ill, confused old woman for a victim. I had been as merciless as Randall, bringing back his finches and his wind bells to stir her clouded befuddled memories.

Poor Aunty. And again, poor Greg.

I forgave him for lashing at me. I deserved it. I had known better before I started, and still I had gone ahead.

How he hated Randall. How consumingly he hated that third intruding Spencer cousin who had split us apart when we were children, and who now, again . . . No. Not again. Gregory and I weren't children any longer.

And the Randall who had sailed home on the *Star of China* to taunt us and wound us and spoil our lives was no longer a boy. He was a kind of devil. A devil to be renounced "with all his works—and all the sinful lusts of the flesh."

I was lying on the bed when the door opened. It was not Norah with a tray, but Gregory. And instead of anger in his eyes, there was only regret and penitence. "Lilas—Lilas—how could I? Darling, darling Lilas. I'll never forgive myself." His arms went around me, and then for the first time I was crying as I clung to him.

"It was all my fault, Greg. My fault, to begin with. I wish we had never heard of Randall. He's nothing to me

—he or his mother. Oh, Greg, we mustn't ever, ever quarrel. Not the two of us. We are all we've got—just each other. I'm so sorry. So dreadfully sorry."

We had dinner together by our bedroom fire. "Mrs. Spencer has a headache," Gregory told the maids. He was very gentle, very good to me. Across our small table he took my hand and kissed our gold wedding band and the solitaire that glittered in the firelight. "I've been thinking," he said slowly, "thinking about a good many things, Lilas. It occurred to me that we ought to get away for a while. Just you and I. It's been too hard on us both, this difficult, sad time with Aunt Edith—the months of it—and now Randall, like a millstone. I should like us to go quite soon. And what would you think of either Santa Barbara or Del Monte? I shall leave it to you." A sorry smile touched his lips. "All things considered, the choice should be yours, I think."

We had finished with apologies. I did not want him to make any more.

"Either would be perfect! Oh, Greg! Greg, how marvelous to get away! And I can be ready in no time. I shall need to shop a bit—and I want to leave Aunty's room in order."

I could not have been happier, knowing our estrangement was over, knowing the mutual hurt we had dealt each other was a thing sealed away.

And I would never again mention Randall: Randall who was nothing to me. Nothing. How many times had I vowed it before? I tried to count as I was drawn irresistibly, again, to our bedroom windows later that evening.

The moan of a buoy, the gray-shrouded bay, the dark mass of wharves, existed only to speak to me of a man whom Gregory said was a murderer.

But Gregory was mistaken. I knew he was mistaken. And in some queer, unfortunate way, he had allowed himself to be mistaken about a girl, "all eyes," from Grass Valley.

For the sake of a thin-faced shabby boy whom Judge Kingston had seen cry, he had to be mistaken. "You had someone once, Ran," I whispered to him through the darkness and fog that separated me from the captain's cabin of the *Star*. "You had someone, even though Aunty failed you later. Even though Gregory and I failed you." And then with a conscience-stricken pang for my disloyalty and injustice, I added, "Perhaps you are fortunate to have had someone who was not a Spencer. Someone to whom love was greater than pride. Someone who cast aside pride to sell a wedding ring and come down from her hills to die for you in an Eddy Street roominghouse."

㉙ 21

I HAD WANTED the door to Aunty's room left open. To see it shut each time we went up or down stairs, or along the hall, would give its emptiness an unbearable finality.

"Would you mind very much if the birds stayed?" I had asked Gregory. "For a little while, at least?"

"Do as you wish, Lilas. I think you know my feeling."

I ought to have gotten rid of them at once after that. It was unkind not to. The gardener would take them gladly, Nellie told me. But every day I had put it off. It was only Aunty they brought close, no one else. I was entirely certain of that. And so they stayed, twittering as noisily, singing as shrilly, as ecstatically, as ever in their pagoda cage. The wind bells clashed softly, their silk tassels moving with every slightest draft. The plants in the window bay flourished.

Except that the counterpane pulled over the bed, and its bolster, were too perfectly smooth, Aunty might still

have been propped there, ready to turn her head toward the door and smile at us.

But she was dead. And I was disposing of her possessions. The morning I got at the task, Aunty's trunk came down from the attic with steamer and train and hotel labels still on it.

Cunard. London. Paris. Bellagio. It was the latter that made me see Aunty's clothes through a shimmer of tears. Beautiful, romantic Bellagio, where two strangers had discovered each other, and delighted, loving Aunty had exclaimed, "It's too perfect!"

Nellie and I packed away everything that was in her closets except her furs. She had wanted me to have them. The tippet that had gone to Europe. Her sealskin coat and muff. Her chinchilla cape. Her astrakhan jacket.

The trunk went back to the attic, and then I took her jewel box into Gregory's and my bedroom, and came back to empty her desk drawers. I tore up old letters and receipted bills. I untied a faded ribbon from a bundle of Valentines. Gregory and Randall and I had slipped them under the front door, rung the bell, and ran. They were scrawled with large ????'s that we had been certain would entirely mystify Aunty. There were xxxx's, too.

I looked through school reports and crayon drawings. One picture, of a tall lopsided house on a tall lopsided hill, had the printed words "My House" under it, and Gregory's name. I was looking out of a front window; at least, a little girl with long black hair was looking out, and some one who could only have been Aunty was getting into a large imposing carriage whose pair of horses had a centipede confusion of legs. It made me smile. I would keep it to show Gregory.

When I had filled a wastebasket with useless, painful

odds and ends for Nellie to carry down to the furnace, I went to the bedside table. I emptied its drawers of hairpins, cough drops, and playing cards, and another candy box a quarter full of nibbled chocolates. Aunty had a little way of biting into candy experimentally; any piece flavored with black walnut or rum cordial went quickly back in its wrapper.

With those candies in my hand, I thought she was as close as she could be, but there were her spectacles to bring her even nearer.

They were on the table top I had so carefully straightened the morning she died. Spectacles just so. Night taper aligned with its matchbox. The little silver bell set close to the edge, where she could always reach it.

I had picked her Bible off the floor that morning. We warned Aunty constantly about reading after the gaslights were turned out. The tiny flicker of the night taper was not bright enough; she would get a headache.

"But I don't read, children," she always corrected us. "I just look through."

She knew her Bible by heart. Since her illness she had often slept with it on the pillow next to her. I took it in my hand and saw it, as I had seen her clothes, through tears. Aunty and her psalm-reading. Aunty and her pat, trite proverbs. And how tiresome it had been to hear long lectures about impossibly good children who could never have existed, and whom we would have scorned had they materialized. Children who received endless gold paper stars for reciting their Sunday school lessons perfectly.

Aunty firmly believed in God and Heaven. She had believed in right and in wrong; the white and the black kind, with no gray. That, of course, meant she believed in Hell, too, and Satan.

"... to be tempted of the devil ..." When I was little, the devil, in my imagination, was ugly; tailed and horned and carrying a fork. I wondered why anyone would be attracted by him. And then at eighteen I heard my first *Faust*. Mephistopheles was someone quite different, I discovered. The horns were there, to be sure, if one looked closely, but . . .

I opened Aunty's Bible, wondering if ever I would take comfort in it as she had. What lines had Aunty read oftenest, most lately, so near the end of her life? The psalms? "The Lord is my shepherd . . ."? or "Whoso dwelleth under the defence of the Most High . . .?"

They all came back to me. With Aunty, a child learned Bible verses backward and forward, or did without some treat.

A first ribbon marker opened to Proverbs, Chapter Six. And Aunty had heavily underscored verses sixteen to nineteen.

" . . . A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, . . . a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren. . . ."

There were more penciled lines at a second marker.

"A false witness shall not be unpunished, and he that speaketh lies shall not escape."

At the third marker, "... he was an abomination and a liar."

Oh, Aunty! To lie there, in your bed, with Randall's finches bursting their throats, to lie there with the wind bells' soft clash to remind you of a boy you believed was a murderer.

I dropped the Bible and went down on my knees by Aunty's bed and let hot tears come, and come. To be dying

and think that about a boy you loved. A boy who might have been your own grandson.

Aunty. Aunty. Why hadn't I had the courage to talk to you? To persuade, and persuade—to convince you it could not have been Randall? Why, why, had I let her lie there, tormented by her "dreams," her terrible recurrent "dreams" about a boy she had been afraid would hang unless she sent him off?

Why? Because I was Lilas, always the coward. I had not dared do otherwise. Hadn't Gregory begged me not to harass her? Not to question? Not to probe?

Probing, he had warned me, could only hurt her more. And Gregory was my husband, whom I obeyed. And now there was nothing I could ever tell Aunty. She was dead.

The clock on the landing struck to remind me that this was a Spencer house on Nob Hill, where life was ordered, where life went on, no matter who had left it. Gregory would be coming home. I got to my feet and smoothed the coverlet where I had laid my head. Gregory would not want to find me in Aunty's room.

I took Aunty's Bible with me. If I put it by my bed, it would please her in case she were looking down. She had been hurt enough.

"Looking down." I remembered an Eye, all-seeing and disapproving, that I had felt fixed on me one night when I huddled, terrified, under my blankets after choosing Randall and a Kuan Yin who had wafted incense seaward and promised us the East.

Randall again. Randall in my thoughts continually since Aunty's death. Surely when Gregory and I went away, I could dismiss him? Would his ship still be docked at the wharves when our stay at Del Monte ended? Would I ever see him again?

Simple reasoning told me it was not likely. What would bring us together? I would never board the *Star* again as long as I lived. And why would Randall come to us, seeking us out? What could he possibly want of Gregory and me? And why, why, had he come back to San Francisco at all?

They were the same futile unanswerable questions Gregory and I had pondered a hundred times. Gregory, asking them, was convinced Randall was a murderer and a potential threat to everything the name Spencer stood for in our secure, hedged world. I, asking them, held an unreasoning conviction he was innocent. But I, too, recognized a threat. I, too, was afraid. I was afraid of the mockery in a pair of agate gray eyes. And even more, I was afraid because a hand, brushing mine through a black suede glove, possessed the power to make tears start.

Del Monte would at least be safe.

I wished, as I changed for dinner and waited for Gregory, that I need not wear black. It made me look sallow. Sallow and dispirited. I was sorry for Gregory, coming home to a quiet gloomy house and a wife whose eyes showed she had been crying. Wasn't there some way to make myself less unattractive? Yes, perhaps. I rang for Nellie. "Bring scissors," I told her, "and your sewing things."

I showed her what I wanted: the collar of my black severe dress cut and turned so there would be a deep *V* at the throat. She nodded emphatic approval when she had hooked me. "The dead is dead, ma'am; it's the living who counts, I always say. And if you don't mind plain speaking, Mr. Gregory has been restive, like, with you so sad, and no company for dinner, and no going out. Not that he doesn't feel Miss Edith's passing as much as you,

but for a man it's different." She knotted another needleful of thread, and made the *V* a trifle lower. "If you'd let me baste in a bit of white, just here—ruching, or such—it 'ud make all the difference; you'd be surprised how much it would help."

So Nellie thought I looked sallow too, did she?

"It's too soon for ruching," I told her reprovingly. I knew I was right. Aunty had been our mother, and you didn't think in terms of what was becoming when your mother had been dead only two weeks. And yet, for a husband's sake . . .

I sat down at my dressing table and drew my hair into a loose heavy chignon, and then I opened Aunty's jewel box and put her pearls around my neck. It was something else that would please her.

And it would please Gregory.

The pearls were creamily iridescent, against my white neck. Perhaps I did not look so sallow after all.

The Chinese woman living over Chung Wai's shop would have skin delicate as eggshell and ivory.

Ivory. The box on my dressing table impelled me to pick it up. The box that contained a box within a box within a box. You took out one, and then another, and another, and another, until you came to the box that was the core. You were supposed to look into each and examine its intricate carvings.

"... its elaborate disclosures. . . ."

I somehow didn't care for the phrase. And I hadn't time to waste on a mere ornament. It was not as simple to refit the few boxes I had opened as to disassemble them. My hands were too hurried.

"Nothing gets done right in a rush, Miss Lilas," Nellie observed primly as she gathered up her sewing things.

"There isn't time to bother with them now." I jumbled the boxes together any which way and pushed them behind an array of scent bottles.

I got up from the dressing table thinking, "I shall go to the top of the stairs. If I'm there when Gregory comes in, this big quiet house will seem less dreary to him."

He was at the front door then, with Norah taking his hat, and when I called out a greeting, he stood for a moment, looking up at me. His dark eyes were ardent and yet, oddly, they struck me as ineffably sober, almost sad. "What have you done," he asked, "to make yourself so especially beautiful, Lilas?"

I laughed. "Nothing more drastic than to cut a *V*—and put on pearls as large as a maharajah's, my silly darling! They are Aunty's; they make my mother's string look like something for a *jeune fille*. I hoped you would like them on me."

"I only wish you could stay the way you are always; just there."

The sentence hung in air. I wished, too, that I could stay just as I was: Lilas Spencer, pleasing Gregory Spencer, who was her husband. For an instant not only the sentence but the moment was suspended. In that fly-in-amber moment when there was only Gregory down there, I above, I heard the clock on the landing. *Tick-tock. Tick-tock.* It was much too loud in that quiet house, much too insistent upon reminding me of all the hours past, irrevocably lost, all the hours ahead that could hold . . . Hold what? I didn't know. I didn't want to make a surmise. It was infinitely simpler, infinitely safer, to smile at Gregory and hurry toward him, and tell myself I wanted his arms around me.

When we sat down to dinner later, Gregory at the head

of the table, I at the foot, with Aunty's silver and china and glass and lengths of damask separating us, we both were in better spirits than we had been for days. Gregory lifted his wine glass to me. I lifted mine to him. Sensible, practical Nellie was right: ". . . it's the living who counts." And we were the living. Young Mr. and Mrs. Gregory Spencer with the whole world cupped in their hands. Or almost the world.

We were careful not to mention Judge Kingston, and we did not speak of Aunty. We talked about Del Monte; it was our definite choice in the end, rather than Santa Barbara.

"How soon, Lilas? Don't let's put it off. Shall we say Friday?" Gregory asked it eagerly. I couldn't refuse him.

"Yes. Friday." I should have to pack in something of a rush. This was Tuesday.

When we went into the drawing room, Gregory let me know again that the *V* of my dress and Aunty's pearls had changed me back into something more than a sallow, depressed woman moping in unbecoming mourning. I was his Lilas once more. The Lilas he was proud of as a possession.

"I wish we might go to the theater," he was saying regretfully. "I'd like nothing better than to show you off in Aunt Edith's box at the Opera House. It seems forever since we've gone out together on anything but the gloomiest of occasions."

"It has been only two weeks, Gregory!"

"I know. But a very long two weeks. And besides the opera, there are so many good plays in town just now. So many splendid actors."

I got up from my chair quickly and went to the piano, and while Gregory had a brandy, I played and sang the

songs he asked for; the Scottish airs, the German lieder, the gentle, simple songs that had been Aunty's favorites. And so there was nothing unfeeling, no impropriety, about our sharing music in her drawing room so soon after she had gone. In a way my soft playing brought her back. The three of us were together as we had been in the beginning. A fire burned in the grate to warm us, as affection had warmed us. And the curtains were drawn, barring not only the encroachment of night, but the encroachment of any intruder.

Just Aunty and Gregory and I, as Gregory had always preferred it. I found myself wishing that for me, too, my dearest memories of Aunty's house could have been of a time when only three Spencers lived in it. A time too long ago to remember, almost. It would have been easier to recall if Nellie had thought to cover the finches shrilling noisily in their pagoda cage. The light in the upper hall, shining through the open door of Aunty's room, was bright enough to keep them singing all night.

Gregory, too, was conscious of them. "Don't they ever stop?" he asked with a lift of his eyebrows. "You may as well stop singing yourself, Lilas. I find them—distracting."

"I'm sorry." I took my hands from the piano keys. "Tomorrow I shall get rid of them. I promise, Greg. Tomorrow, the first thing."

When we went upstairs to our bedroom, I avoided our windows.

Gregory helped me out of my dress, and unclasped the pearls from my throat, and took off my earrings. He took the pins from my hair, and brushed it, as he brushed it every night. "Let it hang loose, Lilas," he asked me. "Don't plait it. I want to look at you."

Something made me want to make the moment lighter.

"Put me in a cabinet," I suggested with a tremulous laugh.
"Then nothing will change. I'll stay the same always.
Your prize possession. A collector's item. Which would
you rather—a Lilas in porcelain, or in porphyry, for your
pleasure?"

I hoped my absurdity would make him smile. I was glad when his lips curved. "White jade would be my choice."

When we had gone to bed, and after Gregory had fallen asleep, I found I could almost ignore the soughing of the wind. "Soon Gregory and I will be going to Del Monte," I told myself.

With drowsy relief, drowsy thankfulness, I imagined the huge white hotel with its verandas and lawns and flower gardens where Gregory and I would stay. I thought about the clothes I would take. I was glad that my mourning was modish, quietly, elegantly modish. Becomingness could be managed.

I would take Aunty's pearls, and perhaps there was time for Madame Delphine to do something about another hat, a really charming hat. And should I shop for a new parasol? Black lace, for promenades, drives?

Gregory always liked me to look my best, and I owed that much to him. Thoughtful, perceptive Gregory, to have guessed how much I wanted to get away. Needed to get away.

xx 22

I WOKE next morning with an agreeable sense of purpose. It was Gregory's trunk and mine, this time, that must come down from the attic, and a happier packing to plan than for Aunty. And after lunch I would go to Madame Delphine's. The day would be full.

I would not have a moment to dwell morbidly on the loneliness of Aunty's house. I would not have time to stand in her room wishing she were there, wishing so futilely she could have reached out for her little silver bell.

I would not have time to think of anything but Del Monte, and of no one but Gregory, who had said, "We both need to get away." I regretted again that there had been even the slightest friction between us; remorsefully I again blamed myself. My tactless insistence on bringing up the subject of Randall's mother was inexcusable. Anything to do with Randall was anathema to Gregory. And

why not? It would be anathema to me, wouldn't it, if my convictions were the same as Gregory's?

I should have known better. What had possessed me? Hadn't I been aware of Gregory's contempt for Randall ever since that long ago afternoon when he had heard me crying and come into my room and tried to comfort me, tried to make me realize how little I would be losing when the *Star of China* sailed out the Gate with Randall aboard?

I could understand now why "contempt" had, in reality, been hate. Gregory had been only nineteen, but already life was opening up to him. Ambitious, steady, clever Gregory. Solid, devoted Gregory. The hate was natural enough when the whole structure of our Spencer lives suddenly proved to be built on sand.

I stopped for a moment at the top of the stairs to go into Aunty's empty, depressingly silent room and stand by her bed. "I wish you hadn't gone." I sighed again as I whispered it. I would have given anything to confide my loneliness to Gregory, my overwhelming loneliness. I must never even hint it, though. Married people had each other—and that was supposed to suffice.

But if only Aunty had picked up her little silver bell—if only she could have reached out and rung it.

I turned away. Why lacerate myself with the thought she might still have been here if we had heard her ring? Why stand staring unhappily at the night table I had straightened after her death, thinking, "This was Aunty's, that was Aunty's," as I aligned so neatly, so finally, all the odds and ends that made up its familiar clutter?

I would have been glad to forget the Bible that had slipped from Aunty's hand and that I had picked up from the rug.

The room was not entirely silent after all, I realized.

My coming in had stirred the painted glass strips hanging from the curtain rod. I suddenly could not bear the shallow sweet clash, nor the chirping of birds I had forgotten to have taken away. I could not bear to think of Aunty listening to them, and then deliberately, pitifully, repudiating their giver by placing those ribbon markers in her Bible and by underscoring ugly line after line of psalms.

I rang for Nellie. "Give the birds to the gardener," I told her, "and give him the wind bells. He might like them especially, knowing that Mr. Randall brought them back."

The gardener was to be envied, I thought wearily as I went to Gregory's and my room. He could listen to the birds sing their loudest, he could listen to the wind bells clash all day, all night, without feeling stabbed.

But I couldn't. I couldn't.

The afternoon drew to its close. The last of a brilliant sunset dulled. The streamers of gray vapor I saw through the windows, drifting in from seaward, would be fog banks in another hour. Buoys would begin to toll and gulls would cry out.

Already the bedroom held a hint of evening shadows and chill.

I began to change for dinner. I would take my time. I would dress carefully. I would please Greg.

As I clasped Aunty's pearls and put on her earrings, the ivory box again drew my eyes.

It was a relief to hear Nellie knock. She lighted the lamps and pulled the curtains, but even when the shadows were gone and a fire burned in the grate, I felt chill, and dreaded the coming of night.

I looked around me, thinking again that I must some time change the color scheme of our bedroom.

Strange that I found it so distasteful.

When Gregory came home, he found me in Aunty's room again. I knew it didn't please him, and I was sorry. "It's just that I miss her so," I confessed humbly. "I know I'm being silly and weak. I know I can't bring her back, but"—my lips trembled—"I remembered a line of one of those psalms she used to make us learn by heart—and it—it hurt terribly."

"We learned so many—which was it, Lilas? Would it help if you told me?" Gregory was trying to be kind instead of impatient. He was humoring me as though I were a child.

"I cried to thee, O Lord . . .'" I had to steady my voice before I could go on. "Don't you see? That was what Aunty should have done—she should have cried out—when she couldn't reach for her bell. But she was too ill, too weak, and now she is gone; and here we are, left by ourselves in this big horrible house."

"It troubles you that much, does it? I hadn't realized. My poor Lilas! But there'll be Del Monte."

When we went down to dinner, I was determinedly bright and talkative. I told Gregory about my new hat, I promised to show him my lace parasol, but I could not eat.

Gregory insisted, however, that I drink the sauterne Lew poured, and when my glass was empty, he had it refilled. The wine should have warmed me, but I was still cold when we went into the drawing room for another one of the quiet evenings that Aunty's death had imposed on us.

I sat gazing into the fire, my attempts at making conversation desultory and unsuccessful. I was grateful that Gregory did not seem to mind. He was arranging and re-

arranging the rare, precious contents of his curio cabinet.

"You will miss them when we are away," I commented idly.

"Yes. Though it's foolish to let anything take too much hold of one."

"It would seem so." I was silent again for a few minutes, and then, putting it very carefully, I asked, "What about the snuff bottles? That Canton collection? If you very much want them, Gregory, would you let me give them to you? They'll cost so frightfully much, and—"

"And you have so much?" he finished for me. "You are very kind, my dear, very generous, but I'm afraid . . ."

"If we offered enough, he would sell, wouldn't he?" I pressed. "If we——"

"We? Wouldn't it be best if you left the bargaining to me? I should hardly have thought you qualified. . . ."

It was said quietly and with logic, and Gregory had not turned from his cabinet, but my hands tightened together in my lap as I wondered how transparent I had been. What was he thinking? That I had contrived any excuse, any excuse at all, that would give me a glimpse of Randall?

He couldn't have guessed. Not possibly. No more than Wrenn or Chung Wai. And for the same reason: because there was nothing to guess about.

It was a "nothing" that I had reiterated over and over in the past weeks. Now, even to my own ears, it sounded hollow. I tried to laugh. "You will have to teach me the curio business, Greg darling. The dealers will find me much too gullible if I make a habit of buying you treasures with Aunty's lovely money."

Lew came in then with Gregory's nightly brandy and a choice of liqueurs for me.

I was sorry when the clock on the landing struck our

bedtime. I wished we could have stayed down longer. I wondered what Gregory would say if I told him what a dislike I had taken to our bedroom. I could imagine his eyebrows raised. "It could scarcely be handsomer or more luxurious, I should think. But change it, of course, if you like." I could imagine him shrugging. "So long as you can afford whims—why not indulge them?"

I wondered, too, what he would say if I clung to his arm going up the stairs and whimpered that they were too steep—that I did not dare look down—that the floor below, so terrifyingly far below, had the slick glisten, in lamplight, of wet rocks.

He would think I was mad. And perhaps I was becoming unbalanced. Why else should the sprawled body on those rocks at the cove spring so vividly into focus for me when I glanced over the banister? And why, so often, should a gull's cry become the thin scream of a girl, plummeting down, down, from a fog-shrouded clifftop?

I pitied Gregory as I averted my eyes from the stairwell. Unhappy Gregory, convinced his cousin is a murderer, and now with another horror looming: a neurotic wife, drifting dangerously close to the line between sanity and insanity.

I was shivering again when we reached our bedroom, and Gregory was concerned. "You aren't well, Lilas. I should have taken you away before." He unhooked my dress, and I felt his hands touch my bare shoulders, felt his lips on my neck. "My beautiful Lilas." I could see him, in the pier glass, glance toward the trunks that had come down from the attic and were standing, partially packed, their lids open, against a wall.

He said it lightly, but his face wore the same faintly sorry look I had noticed the evening before. I had hurt

him. Had I been hurting proud, reserved Gregory daily, nightly, since Aunty's death? Had I made it all too obvious that for me the house held nothing but loneliness? I was sorry for him, sorry for the hurting. I wanted to make amends. I put my hand on his sleeve.

"I've been foolishly morbid. Inexcusably selfish. Going away will help enormously. You'll see; afterward, everything will be different—better."

"It is what I am counting on, Lilas," he answered gravely. "It is what I am hoping for."

㉓ 23

I SLEPT BADLY; eventually I resigned myself to lying awake. Beyond the open shutters a white cold moon struggling through drifting, vaporous clouds shone in, now brightly, now dimmed, to touch the furnishings of our hushed room where Gregory breathed quietly, his dark head on the pillow next to mine, an arm thrown around me.

The satin and velvet chairs. The mirrors. My dressing table. Gregory's chiffonier. And the trunks. The trunks against the wall, looming in the moonlight as huge black reminders of our going away.

But I wouldn't go. I couldn't! Let Randall be who or what he was. I had to see him again.

All he had been to me in the old days rushed back in waves to inundate me; all that I had seen looking out of the cool agate eyes of the returned Randall rendered me defenseless. Randall the boy, my childhood idol, but now Randall the man—and something between us still.

Why deny it any longer, fight against it? When he had gone away, I had told myself, "No one knows I am cut in half." And he had come back a Randall I recognized, not gladly, not easily, but irrefutably, as part of my very self.

There it was, the secret of my heart exposed, taken out, examined. And already, in thought if not in deed, I had committed adultery with him. Why else had I gone alone to the *Star*, but to seek him out? Why had I gone twice, surreptitiously, to Chung Wai's? What was the honest answer?

And over there, against the wall, those trunks; one more day to get through, one more night, and then Gregory and I would be leaving. I couldn't go. I wouldn't! I'd tell Gregory I was ill.

As I silently cried out my rebellion, I knew I was only crying words. I knew perfectly well I would go to Del Monte. I would go anywhere, do anything Gregory expected or asked of me. I was Gregory's wife. A wife had no right to let her thoughts stray. And if she had made a mistake, and if her ardor had cooled, her affection lessened, because of someone else's intrusion, she still had a duty, still owed loyalties.

Next to me, Gregory was breathing quietly. He had fallen asleep with a hand twined in my long unbound hair. And as the moonlight streamed across it, I recognized, as I had never recognized before, the fundamental reason why I had married Gregory.

Gregory's hands were Randall's hands.

Cheated Gregory! I had become his wife believing I loved him, but he was a lost Randall I had found, a worshiped Randall miraculously restored to me.

Gregory's stark haughty face transformed by all my stifled yearnings into Randall's face.

Gregory's black hair, Randall's hair. Gregory's narrow-lipped mouth, with its sudden sweet curve that made my heart turn over, Randall's mouth.

The same Spencer nose. The Spencer bearing, the same lift of the head.

The eyes different, yes.

Out there, beyond the windows where the *Star of China* lay berthed and moonlight shone on masts and boom, on yard arms and bowsprit, was gray-eyed Randall aboard his ship, or had he gone ashore to an assignation at Chung Wai's? To think it, to see him there, was to bleed inwardly.

I tried to picture the nighttime, the mysterious secret nighttime he had first discovered so long ago, and made his own, as he had later made the East his own.

He would have shared them—but I had been a coward.

As I remembered, tormented, the dark, forbidden streets Randall had ventured along, the clock on Aunty's landing struck two.

A part of our lives. Marking each hour. Once before when it struck two, I had heard the faint jangle of wind bells along a dark quiet ell, and I had known that Randall was creeping to bed. After that Wrenn, and Wrenn's horrible shadow, at the foot of the front hall stairs. And then morning, and Aunty's room, with the door closed.

None of it the truth then. None of it the truth now.

I knew, with a conviction stronger than ever, that Randall was not a murderer. And yet what evidence did I have, concrete evidence, that would prove his innocence to Gregory? And how could I go on living with Gregory, sharing this bed, sharing Aunty's house, unless I could make him see it as I saw it?

A wife and husband diametrically opposed in their thinking. The studied avoidance of certain subjects. The

constant danger of painful scenes. Gregory and I had experienced one already. And what was the trip to Del Monte but a temporary patching up?

The rent in the fabric still showed; there were other thin areas ready to give momentarily. Was that marriage?

It was my marriage. The marriage Lilas Spencer had made. And marriage was indissoluble—a sacrament.

“Caro nome che il mio cor—dear name, my heart enshrines. . . .” But for me, the sacrament of marriage had meant the enshrinement of Randall.

Randall. Randall. Randall, always Randall as long as I lived.

And afterward. In Aunty's Hell, I would be eternally wandering, eternally searching, never finding him. That would be my punishment; the punishment of an adulteress. And all because I had been a coward, afraid to follow any pattern but Aunty's and Gregory's, and had chosen lamp-light and snugness rather than the luring unknown dark outside.

And now it was too late. Too late for me. But not too late for Randall, who had a mistress. Not too late for Gregory, who had acquired a wife to keep in the cabinet that was Aunty's house, locked safely behind the glass of its richness and respectability.

How she pleased him, that wife of his, adorned with Spencer pearls! How she delighted Gregory, the connoisseur who as a boy had brought a porcelain Kuan Yin, and touched, so knowingly, the perfection of her white glaze.

Gregory's hands—eager, always, to reach out for the smooth, the fine, the thing that to him expressed a perfection. . . .

I should feel flattered.

But it was Randall I wanted. No one existed for me but Randall in Gregory's and my bedroom, alternately moonlit and dark, moonlit and dark.

Randall. Randall.

I was the child, again, who had thought, "I am Randall, and Randall is me," until the wind bells from Chinatown began to separate us with their cruel jangling.

But forget Randall the boy. Remind yourself of the man who is back. Remind yourself of mocking eyes in Aunty's drawing room, making yours drop, and a cool sardonic smile in the hall while you buttoned your gloves to go to a ball. Remind yourself of the captain's cabin, and a taunting, "Why don't you open it? Do, by all means."

Even while I remembered those Imperial silks, foaming over the lid of a sea chest, I longed for Randall with a passion that racked me. And with Gregory's arm encircling me, I was praying: "Show me how to prove that he didn't kill Rosie."

If only that one thing were granted me, nothing more, I perhaps could go on, in some numbed, stumbling way, until Randall sailed out the Gate again, and out of Gregory's and my life.

Randall was not a murderer.

But for Gregory to be thinking it across our dinner table every night, and in Aunty's drawing room, and when we went up the stairs—with jagged, wet rocks below us instead of parquetry . . . No! I had to prove it.

Gregory stirred in his sleep. "Lilas? Lilas?" he questioned, without waking.

"I am here, Gregory."

"Here." He echoed it in a dream perhaps, with something like a sigh, as he slept on.

If he knew, if he guessed, my longing, and the pain of

it? I could see the bitterness curling his mouth. "You and Randall. It was always the two of you!" He had said it once, and he would say it again, with his eyes black with jealousy and fury.

And I would be alone with him in Aunty's empty, deserted house. Entirely alone.

Need he guess, though? Not if I were careful; very, very careful. But if I persisted in my marshaling of evidence—if I attempted to present it . . . I remembered Gregory's swift, terrible anger when I tried to explain about Randall's mother. For her there had been Judge Kingston's actual personal knowledge to weight the scales. Still he had refused to listen.

And even if I had the courage to face Gregory, from where would the evidence have come?

The moonlight that intermittently defined the bedroom with its cold whiteness made a glittering liquid pool of my dressing table mirror and glinted on my silver brush and comb, my silver-topped powder jar and scent bottles. Behind them was Randall's wedding present.

Boxes within boxes. Their complexities one with the complexities of all our Spencer lives. My life. Gregory's life. Randall's life.

Slow hot tears forced themselves through my eyelids.

There had to be a way to find the truth. The proven indisputable proof. And not only for my own sake, but for Gregory's, who would be freed from Wrenn's blackmail—the Old Man of the Sea dragged off his back—and for Randall's.

But where to look, how to begin the search, with nothing to go on but my unreasoning, stubborn conviction of Randall's innocence?

Should I take it step by step, as I had meant to lead

Aunty along? Yes. And I would start with the May of that last catastrophic summer when all our worlds were ruined.

The end of May. Gregory home from Harvard, his term examinations behind him, brilliantly passed, going downtown every morning to Spencer and Company.

The end of May for Randall. His studies failed. His summer ruined.

The end of May for Aunty and for me. Menlo Park.

And for Rosie?

Night after night for her to go to the beach. Teena was old. Teena would have plodded up to her attic room and fallen asleep almost before summer darkness fell. How could Wrenn have sworn, then, with any certainty, that Rosie was not the "loose" girl I longed to believe her? Wrenn, too, had been in Menlo Park. Wrenn couldn't have been sure.

As many men as she wanted, for Rosie to meet on a street corner. You saw the type who would have smiled at her, and slowed his strolling, every time you looked out of a carriage driving downtown.

Men with their derby hats a little too jauntily tilted. The checks of their suits too large, their cravats too bright.

Race-track men. Gamblers. Vaudeville actors.

And one of them sidling up to a precocious Rosie and holding out the promise of something more than a life of lugging coal buckets, emptying washbasins and chamber-pots. One of them amusing himself and then getting rid of her when she told him about the child coming.

Why couldn't it have been that way?

I longed so fervently for a strolling, cheaply handsome man to have lifted his derby, that for moments I overlooked the obviousness of the flaw in my premise.

Randall's handkerchief.

The tears seeping from under my eyelids were a salt taste at the corners of my mouth as they made rivulets down my cheeks and soaked my pillow.

Randall—defiling our cove. Randall giving our shells to Rosie.

But he hadn't. He couldn't have. Not the boy Ran.

But who, then?

Necessarily, someone in Aunty's house who knew about the cove, that tiny half-moon of rock and sand, lying hidden below a steep cliff where yellow lupine blew in a wind from China.

But who could know? The cove had been a secret between only the three of us when we were children. Wrenn, yes,^{had} knew where it was, and Aunty, vaguely, though she had never seen it. But no one else. It was inviolate, except for the gulls and cormorants that soared and swooped in the sky above it, the sandpipers, wading at its shoreline, the crabs and the barnacles, the jellyfish and sea anemones, opening like purple flowers in their rock pools.

That was what we liked to think. That was what we persuaded ourselves to believe.

Someone who knew. . . . As the white, struggling moonlight once more illumined the bedroom, my eyes went again to the dressing table it touched, to the liquid ripples that were mirror, to the trunks, and to Gregory's tall rosewood chiffonier.

Nellie had been emptying its drawers into the half-packed trunks.

Gregory's chiffonier—something to do with packing—and something to do with Teena? What was my mind catching at? What association of ideas?

Teena? Teena and stacks of freshly laundered clothes? Teena, and the chiffonier, and our cove? That packing,

half done? Gregory's shirts? The underthings? The handkerchiefs?

Oh, dear God in Heaven! The handkerchiefs!

I somehow held back an exclamation that could have been a scream, a ghastly scream, waking Gregory.

No. No. Don't let him wake. Please, God! Please, Kuan Yin—whatever will mercifully listen—don't let Gregory wake and look at me with those dark eyes of his and read my thoughts.

Handkerchiefs.

The handkerchiefs for two boys, put away, year after year, in separate bureaus. The boys' handkerchiefs Aunty used to say she bought by the gross. White linen handkerchiefs, all alike except for the initials in one corner.

And one of them could have been put away in a wrong drawer.

I froze, rigid, lying next to Gregory. And yet a horrid perspiration poured from me. My nightdress was wet. Clammy. Clinging.

Was I mad? Was I dreaming? Was this another nightmare?

Teena, clumping up from the basement with a laundry basket piled high. Teena, wanting to hurry back to a coffeepot, coming to a boil. Teena putting a handkerchief—just one handkerchief—marked R.S. in the wrong drawer.

My thoughts whirled chaotically.

A handkerchief. Shells. A murderer.

And I could not move my body, turn my head, without waking Gregory, whose beautiful, strong sensitive hand was twined in my streaming hair.

Rosie's hair, bundled under her housemaid's cap, had been yellow. But her arms, her smooth arms, had been as

white as the blanc de chine goddess Gregory had once brought home from Chinatown to be the beginning of what we called "Gregory's collection."

Kuan Yin's perfection. Rosie's perfection. Her white arms displayed by the rolled-up sleeves of a chambray morning uniform. The proper blue-and-white print a "twceny" would wear drudging in a London house. The suitable uniform Aunty, the Anglophile, entirely approved; but it was a uniform with a starched apron tied around it, under which a four months' secret could grow and swell, unnoticed.

May. The end of May—until the end of September, and Gregory's last evening at home before he went back to Harvard.

It had been Randall, though, who slipped out. A sullen, restive Randall, hating Aunty for curbing his summer, hating her for flinging Gregory's superiority, Gregory's perfection, in his face. Randall, hating as he had never hated so fiercely, the arbitrary circumference of Aunty's world.

And to Aunty he had been a Randall slipping out to put an end to the importunities, the threats, of a Rosie grown desperate.

Was it Randall, though, who had the most to lose if Rosie had carried out her threats and gone to Aunty?

No. But substitute Gregory's name, and what was the answer? Proud Gregory. Brilliant, ambitious Gregory, who was a Harvard man. Gregory, who one day would be the head of Spencer and Company.

Rosie, too, had ambitions. Or had she fallen in love? She had saved the shells; she had saved strands of seaweed, and pressed yellow lupine between blotters.

Rosie, Rosie. Why did we have to be women? Why did we have to be born, you and I?

Gregory and a housemaid, though? Fastidious, selective Gregory? Ah, but a younger Gregory, then, with a looser rein on himself, and seeing nothing, at first, but that smooth whiteness the eyes of a sensual boy had lighted on.

Later, his eyes open to the ruination of a girl in a sleazy pink silk dress could bring about.

Gregory himself had told me Rosie's dress was pink. And how had he known?

But why the cove for those two? Why, ever, our cove?

My nails dug into my palms. It was clear enough why: they would have solitude.

And Gregory had plenty of pocket money. He could drive out any night he chose with a rented horse and buggy; and he could stay as late as he wanted. He had a front-door key. Aunty had given it to him when he came home from college. "You are old enough, dear boy," she told him, "and responsible enough."

A key. To take each thing in turn, to think back, to remember, with desperate accuracy, was the only way.

Gregory could not have used his key that last evening: Aunty had asked him to bolt the front door. I could see her there in the drawing room, her drawn work in her lap when Gregory and Randall and I went upstairs.

But there was the kitchen door or a kitchen window.

Randall knew how to get in and out. Gregory would find a way, too, if he needed.

The soft jangle of Chinatown wind bells was in my ears again. "Randall is slipping down the backstairs," I had told myself unhappily, "and once more I am left behind because I am not brave enough."

But hadn't the bells jangled again then, if only faintly, like an echo of themselves? I had been only half awake.

Had Gregory cautiously, cautiously, turned a doorknob?

My sleep had been light, uneasy, I remembered. And then again I had heard the shallow clash of gently swaying wind bells. "Randall is safely back again," they had told me, "daring reckless Randall, who has stayed out so late."

But I had dozed; he could have crept up the stairs earlier. It was a Gregory, driving back from the cove, leaving a hired buggy at a livery stable, and getting himself to Aunty's house, who would necessarily come in as late as two o'clock in the morning.

Not that he need have hurried unduly. No one knew where he had been, and he had nothing to hide. The tide would come—and he didn't know that Rosie had treasured her shells; he didn't know Wrenn would find sand on a closet floor.

The tide. What was there especially to remember about the tide?

Again I caught back a scream.

I should have seen it years ago. Randall would never have left Rosie lying sprawled on the rocks, trusting to a tide that had not rolled in high enough nor soon enough that September night.

Randall knew the time table of tides better than arithmetic tables. But not Gregory, indifferent, always, to the cove and its in-rushing, out-rushing green waves. Not Gregory, forgetting that with daybreak some chance offshore fisherman, trolling or seining from his boat, might see a patch of pink, tell-tale against dark rocks.

But I was dreaming! The horror of my thoughts was the horror of a nightmare!

The man so quietly, deeply asleep beside me was pas-

sionate, jealously loving Gregory, who kept me in a locked cabinet only because I was his most dearly cherished of all possessions.

Loyal, devoted, good Gregory. Aunty's pride, her satisfaction.

Not, perhaps, the very core of her heart. That was another boy.

I had pitied a mining-camp girl, "all eyes." I had been touched with a fleeting pity for Wrenn. Now my heart swelled for Gregory, whose wife, in her nightmare, was prattling, "It is you, Gregory darling, who is a murderer. Not Randall, the black sheep, but you."

Would the nightmare ever end?

Over and over I repeated to calmly, deeply sleeping Gregory: "It is you. It is you."

The moon waned. Daylight came. Gregory wakened and kissed me. I lay in his arms, unresisting. Why should I struggle? Why should I shrink with repugnance? I was his wife. And part of the punishment meted out to me for unfaithfulness was the visitation of a nightmare from which there was no awakening.

Nothing had reality for me but the trunks against the wall.

Gregory dressed and went down to his breakfast. I dragged myself out of bed and put on a peignoir, and said a natural-enough-sounding "good morning" to Nellie when she brought my tray.

Perhaps I was pale. She glanced at me with something of concern, I thought, but her only comment was to suggest I leave the rest of the packing entirely to her.

"Don't trouble yourself to lift a finger, Miss Lilas—Mrs. Gregory, that is, as I'm always forgetting to say. I'll finish the trunks in no time once Teena comes up from the

laundry; there's a petticoat ruffle needs fluting, and Mr. Gregory's shirts I'm waiting for."

And his handkerchiefs? If she said the word *handkerchief*, I would . . . What would I do? Fly apart? Scream the screams I had held back all night? Scream, and then babble crazily about wind bells and tides and two Spencer boys making a thoroughfare out of Aunty's back stairs?

That was what insane people did, wasn't it--babble?

My hands shook as I poured out my coffee; I tried to lift the pretty Dresden cup to my mouth, and then had to put it down, clattering in its saucer, before it spilled over.

Gregory came back to kiss me again, as he did every morning before Wrenn drove him to the office. His glance, too, was concerned.

"Did you have a poor night?" he asked. "You look peaked."

He told Nellie to be sure and pack plenty of clothes for us both, ". . . everything we might need for a long stay. I shan't bring Mrs. Spencer home until she has had a rest. A real rest. And put in a pair of low-heeled shoes, if Mrs. Spencer has such a thing."

He tilted my chin, drawing my eyes up to him, in a little way he had. "Do you remember our walks at Bellagio, along the lakeside? We shall take walks at Del Monte, too, sweet."

Once more he kissed me, and then he went downstairs. He would get in Aunty's carriage. Wrenn would flick the horses. He would be off down the hill to the bustling streets where hundreds of substantial, respected men like himself were beginning their day's work. Not one of them differed from another fundamentally; in Gregory's instance a disparity existed only because he was more clever,

more charming, than the average man, and more spectacularly successful.

Brilliant Gregory, clearing so splendid a path for himself. Lilas Spencer's ambition-ridden husband.

But who was Lilas Spencer? No one I knew, no one I could recognize as I tried again to lift a cup to my lips and this time felt the scald of spilled coffee. The nightmare was upon me again in all its unspeakable horror. With those few words, "clearing a path," it had materialized.

Rosie had been an obstacle. Not for long, though. Only for a few swiftly ripening, swiftly passing, summer months.

The bedroom, with the trunks against the wall, filled me all at once with panic. Any room—any room in the house but this. If I could escape from the trunks—escape from the crimson I found too dark, of curtains and bed hangings and wax roses. If somewhere there were a refuge, just for minutes, until I could get hold of myself.

I wet my dry lips. "I shall be in Miss Edith's room, Nellie, if you want me."

As I said it, I stood up, wondering if my legs would support me.

The long hall stretching ahead of me was interminable. I did not dare glance down when I came to the stairwell. Instead, I crowded against the wall, that was solid and safe-feeling as my shoulder brushed it.

I opened Aunty's door, and for a brief instant the panic that filled me gave place to indescribable relief. This was Aunty's room, where I had come as a child to be petted and made much of, and loved by Aunty who was omnipotent and who would never, never, let harm come to any of her Spencer children.

Aunty's bright sunny bedroom. But now the shades

were drawn, and when I stopped to think of it, had it ever been truly bright since a morning she had sent for me and said, "Shut the door, Lilas"?

And why had I thought the horror of a nightmare would dissolve more readily here than in any other room? Instead, it was mounting with every reminder that Aunty was gone and that her house was empty, except for an unreal Lilas and unreal Gregory.

If I put my hand out and touched her spectacle case, there on the night stand, or her pack of playing cards, could I bring her back for even the shortest while, so that some of the loneliness would go, some of the horror be dispelled?

It was childish of me, but one by one I picked up each thing on the table and whispered her name in a desperate calling out to her.

"Aunty? Aunty dear?"

I picked up the little silver call bell last, and then as I put it down again on the edge of the table closest to the bed, where either Nellie or I had always carefully left it in Aunty's reach, I was suddenly trembling with a new and different horror.

I had straightened each thing on the table after Aunty's death. But why had there been any need to change the position of her bell? And I *had* changed it. I could remember its tinkle, clearer and louder by far than the stir of tasseled glass strips that had hung then in Aunty's window.

A metallic, carrying tinkle. I was not imagining it; I had moved the bell automatically, as I had moved everything else, thinking, "This is the way Aunty has always liked her table tidied. This is the way she would want it left, in order."

Was it Nellie or I who had been criminally careless,

saying good night to Aunty on the last evening of her life without making certain her bell was in reach?

Was that why she had died? But why, and how, in the first place, had the bell been moved so much as an inch? It belonged on the left-hand side of the table, and nowhere else, ever, not for an instant, either during the day, or at night.

When I picked it up it had been on the far right. I had taken it in my right hand for a moment while I stooped to the floor to pick up Aunty's Bible.

Nellie or I? Which one of us, never to be forgiven for negligence?

Nellie or I? Nellie or I? The question was like the pendulum of the clock on the stairs, swinging back and forth, back and forth.

Nellie or I? Nellie or I?

As I stared at the silver bell, the ghastly nightmare engendered by moonlight shining fitfully on two half-packed trunks and on a chiffonier seized me again.

If Aunty had tried to reach the bell and the distance between the left-hand side of the table and the right had prevented her reaching it, either Nellie or I had killed her as certainly as either Randall or Gregory had killed Rosie.

And the pendulum, so loud in Aunty's empty room, was asking another question—"Which of those two? Which of those two?"—as it swung back and forth, inexorably demanding a final answer.

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A FINAL ANSWER. I closed Aunty's door behind me and started back along the hall stunned and dazed by the implication behind those words.

It could not have been Randall—my heart still cried it out passionately, defensively. But to choose the only alternative, to say, "Gregory, then—because there is no one else," would be also to say I was going out of my mind, and that the weight of not only one dark horror, but of a second, even more terrible, imposed by a little silver call bell had brought me to the breaking point.

The bell had been moved. But neither Nellie nor I had been careless. Some one had put it out of Aunty's reach after both of us had left her bedroom. Nellie was asleep. I was sitting in front of our fire, trying to read.

Again. I must retrace each step at a time. Again, I must search my memory, desperately—ruthlessly.

Not to find the murderer of Rosie, a housemaid, killed

eight years ago, but to put a name to Aunty's murderer.

Gregory's Aunt Edith, whose house, to me, was still odiously fragrant with funeral flowers. Gregory's Aunt Edith, who was his own flesh and blood.

We had gone to the theatre Aunty's last night. We had tiptoed in to look at her on our return.

Her bell? Any recollection of its exact position on the table eluded me utterly. Because it was in place? So familiarly in place?

Gregory had suggested he sit with Aunty for a little while. I had been relieved and grateful. Later, when he came to bed, I asked if we need send for Dr. Mason. No, he said. Aunty was sleeping more quietly, much more quietly. We could wait and see how she was in the morning.

He had said something else as he took out his cuff links and studs. "A pity Aunt Edith's voice couldn't have gone. . . . I'd feel safer." And I had agreed with him, and thrown myself in his arms, weeping with hysterical fear that the troubled ramblings and incoherencies of a sick old woman could give away a secret and tumble in ruins the handsome, splendid façade of our Spencer world.

But what if Gregory had been wondering whether those distressed, and distressing, ramblings could remind a doctor, or a nurse—any listener—that Randall was not the only Spencer boy living in Aunty's house eight years ago? "Two boys," I myself had heard her murmuring vaguely. "One so good, and one so wicked."

Aunty, another obstacle.

"These . . . things doth the Lord hate: . . . A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood. . . ."

There was no moonlight shining along the hall as it

had shone in my bedroom the night before, but there was sunshine, morning sunshine, streaming through the stair-landing window to make all I was thinking the more horrible by its bright normalcy.

"Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me." I could remember that, even though I could not remember the exact position of a little silver bell on a linen-covered bed table.

Had Aunty's nightmares been like mine? Verse after verse underlined in Aunty's Bible flooded my mind as I asked it. "A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren."

One after another, preposterous, hideous questions forced themselves upon me. Could Aunty, too, have been faced with the same terrible dilemma as I? For her, too, had there been conflicting loyalties? In the end, all those months when she was dying, had her poor confused thinking tried somehow to exonerate a boy who still had a tenuous but unyielding hold on her affections? And in her pitiful attempts at self-persuasion, had she, too, recognized the only alternative?

She had been troubled and not herself even before Randall brought home the wind bells and the finches.

And Gregory had barred Randall from the house after his first invasion of our tranquil drawing room. "He will only disturb Aunt Edith."

The reason for the barring? The true reason? Was it because Randall, an innocent Randall, tiring at last of his role of scapegoat, would prove to Aunty that she could believe what she longed to believe?

Randall, her favorite, reinstated in her heart.

Gregory done for.

But a scapegoat? Why should an innocent Randall ever

have allowed himself to be put in that position? Why had he let Aunty send him away instead of standing his ground? Even a boy who was only seventeen need not have been that afraid. Why hadn't he defended himself?

I was asking myself the unanswerable, as I had asked it time after time before, and when I reached Gregory's and my bedroom, I was dizzy and sickened by the jumble of disordered thoughts, useless conjectures that had no sane focus, and that led me deeper into a morass of fearful doubts, unspeakable suspicions.

I caught hold of a chair back to steady myself. "Nellie, could you stop packing for a moment? Could you bring me a glass of water, please?"

"Miss Lilas!" Nellie whirled from the trunks and dropped the dress she was folding to rush to me. "What's wrong, ma'am? Are you ill? Here—drop in this chair. And put your head down, that helps. There—there you are. Now, then, just give me a second, and I'll have Miss Edith's smelling salts for you." She flew out the door, and then was back with one of the little glass crown-stoppered bottles Aunty had kept in every purse and drawer and sewing bag.

"That's it, a good deep sniff. My gracious, you gave me a scare, Miss Lilas. What came over you that you got so wobbly and so white-looking all at once?"

"I don't know." I put a hand to my forehead. "My head hurts, Nellie. My head hurts dreadfully." I reached quickly for Nellie's hand. "Don't go. Stay with me. I'll feel better in a moment, but don't go."

I was afraid she would finish the packing and leave me to busy herself with any one of her usual morning tasks, and nothing could have terrified me more than the thought of being left alone in that ghastly bedroom with

its crimson satins and velvets, its bed where I would lie, night after night, as long as I lived. Gregory's dark head would be on the pillow next to mine. His sensitive, beautiful long-fingered hands, common to Spencer men, would be entwined in my black hair. He would hold me close—his Lilas. His prized, achieved Lilas.

"If you'd just let me fetch the sal volatile, ma'am."

"No. No, Nellie. Stay here."

"If that's what you'd rather; and I tell you what, I'll give your temples a rub, and then I'll brush your hair. That'll take care of a headache quicker than anything."

I shut my eyes, thinking, "Perhaps I can escape some of the swarming, loathesome horrors if I don't look at the bed where I shall lie down every night with Gregory, who . . ."

I would not let myself finish.

It was a comment of Nellie's that made me open my eyes again. "That box, Miss Lilas, that carved box, there on your dressing table, you never did get it put together, I see."

No." I glanced at Randall's wedding present. "No, but I haven't tried again."

"It wouldn't take too much fiddling with, would it, if a person had the patience to settle down to it?"

"I don't know."

"Now is as good a time as any to find out; why not have a try?"

Kind, sensible Nellie was treating me like a child, an ill child, whom a toy might divert.

"The way it strikes me, Miss Lilas, it's not much except a dust catcher—if you'll excuse me saying so—all apart, the way it is."

"That's true."

I picked up the outer box, that was nothing but a delicate thin-walled hollow cube, without much meaning, just as the inner boxes were meaningless, until they were again related, each to the other, each a part of an intricate whole.

The ivory felt warm to my cold hands. I picked up all the boxes in turn, curiously intrigued by the problem of fitting them together, curiously determined that each piece so precisely sized, so varied of shape, should interlock with another. And just as the box had drawn my eyes to it, irresistibly, again and again, ever since I had put it on my dressing table, it was impelling me to finish what I thought I had begun only to humor Nellie.

Suddenly I had accomplished it. And as the last segment of the whole fitted into place, I realized, as suddenly, how the puzzling box-within-a-box complexities of our interlocked lives—Gregory's and mine and Randall's—could be fitted into place.

I would go to Randall and ask him a single question: would he admit to me, for the sake of whatever once was between us, that he had killed Rosie? "Tell me the truth," I would beg him, "so that I can know whether I have gone mad or not."

The truth—to hear him confess it was my only hope of struggling free from the morass of suspicion into which I had fallen, my only hope of ever again breathing in a world untainted by a miasma of horror and loathing.

I was mad. How else could moonlight on a chiffonier have done to me what it had done last night, and how else could a silver bell on a bedside table have stunned me with its sly, dreadful insinuations?

But Randall could free me. Randall could give me a key that would deliver me from darkness, the prison house of my disordered mind, and lead me into light.

Gregory would be my Gregory again. Aunt Edith's Gregory.

Just let him answer me, let him confess, and then he could sail out the Gate again whenever he chose. It would no longer concern me. I would not feel a need to weep, either, ever again, for a boy gone from Aunty's house. The boy could come back if he liked. He could laugh on the stairs, run in the halls. All the rest of my life I would remember him with delight, innocent delight. He was an entity; an imperishable recollection nothing could tarnish. But the man Randall—the man, an entity, too—would be someone utterly foreign to me or to Gregory, utterly apart from us. A murderer, self-acknowledged. And with the acknowledgement, all hidden threats would dissolve. Our marriage would be safe, an intruder banished forever, muddied waters clear again.

As simple as that: "Will you admit you killed Rosie?" But there was so little time left me. Tomorrow we left.

I was still holding the Chinese box. I stared at it, irresolute and hesitant, and then the touch of ivory against my palm might have been the touch of a hand.

Abruptly I stood up. "I shall get dressed, Nellie. I am going—going downtown. Don't look so upset. I feel much better, and fresh air will be good for me."

"You sure you're up to it, Miss Lillas? And you'll be wanting Wrenn?"

"No. I prefer to walk."

Nellie showed her disapproval. "All those blocks to town, and then shopping?"

Let her think it would be shopping. With an impatience I tried to hide I assured her again that I felt much better, and asked her to put out my street clothes; and then I hurried to my little escritoire, took a sheet of paper from

a pigeonhole, and dipped a pen in the inkwell. "*Randall—I must see you before five o'clock this afternoon. Urgent. Will you be aboard the Star? Lilas.*"

I sealed the note in an envelope, and then I dressed. My hands were shaking as I pinned on my hat. So little time. It was already almost noon, and it would be only by the merest chance that my message would reach Randall if I left it at the wharf. He could be anywhere; at his shipping agent's office, at the gold exchange, the Marine Exchange. He could be lunching at the Palace, or the Poodle Dog. He could be in a club or a bar. And I had only today, or what was left of it, until Gregory came home.

My knees quaked under me. Another night in this bedroom, whose horrible dark crimson velvets and satins were like a stain—a spreading stain, on jagged rocks—and through whose shutters I would hear gulls screaming, the moan of a buoy, the fancied sound of the sea? No! No! But unless I could ask my question . . .

I was desperate, trying to think how I could make certain my note would get to him before the fragment of time left me became no time at all; and then, all at once, I knew where to go. Chung Wai could find Randall for me, quickly, easily, wherever he might be. The Chinese knew everything about everyone, people always said, and even though they laughed, saying it, they more than half meant it. There were grapevines. Chinatown was tangled in them. And Chung Wai, of all those bland-faced wise-eyed Orientals, had a way of acquainting himself with Captain Randall Spencer's comings and goings.

I was buttoning my gloves as I hurried down the stairs, and was very much Mrs. Gregory Spencer in my new black broadcloth town costume with Persian lamb bandings on the skirt and mantle, my close-fitting toque with

its short crepe mourning veil for Aunty, who had been all that a mother could have been to me. But in some harrowing, fearful manner I was Rosie, too. Rosie at the brink of a steep cliff, looking down—but hadn't I been Rosie each time I was on the stairs with Gregory, or thinking of Gregory, the past few weeks?

I clung to the banister and prayed that Nellie was not watching me. She wouldn't let me go. She would use the prerogative of Aunty's Nellie, who knew best for Miss Lilas. Good kind Nellie, thinking I was ill, would send for Gregory.

I prayed again, to whoever would listen. "Not Gregory—not Gregory near me until I have my answer."

I got to the bottom of the stairs, and Norah saw me out the front door.

"It's a nice day to take a walk, ma'am," she remarked pleasantly.

"Yes. Yes, it is," I agreed. Again I was wetting my dry lips. "A lovely day. Such a lovely blue sky. Such lovely sunshine."

Idiotic, the nothings I was repeating, over and over, with my stiff mouth stretched in a smile. "A lovely, lovely day."

She didn't keep me, though. She didn't call Nellie. I was down the scrubbed marble steps. I was past the urns of pink geraniums. I was past the iron mastiffs, passed the spiked iron rails fencing the lawn.

Now I was at the corner. Now I had turned it and was out of sight. No one could pull me back, no one would know where to find me. Not even Gregory, if he were to come home early and start looking.

I wondered what people would think of me as they passed me on my hurrying way to a livery stable. They

would not know I was mad unless I stopped them and tried to explain which one of the two Spencer boys had murdered Miss Edith Spencer's pregnant pantry maid.

When I got to the livery stable and was in the hired carriage, I told the coachman "Chinatown—Chung Wai's, on Dupont Street," with my hands tightly clenched on a small white envelope with a black border. And then I was there, getting out at the curb and going into the hole-in-the-wall brick-fronted frame shop where so many beautiful things were kept.

Chung Wai shuffled to meet me, bowing and smiling.

"Very pleased you come again, Missie Spencer. Most honored. Most happy."

"Thank you." I held out the note. "This is for my cousin, Captain Spencer. It is important. Very important. It must reach him as quickly as possible. But I am not certain where he may be found, and I wondered—I thought perhaps—it occurred to me you would know." I stumbled through it with my face burning.

"Me know, Missie Spencer?"

"I hoped so—because of your business—because you go to the wharves—you see all the shipping people." As I struggled lamely to go on with it, I opened my purse and took out a five-dollar gold piece. "Surely you could get a boy to look for him. The note *has* to reach him—I'll give two of these to any boy who delivers it. But he would have to go at once. He would have to hurry."

"One small minute, if you please. You wait. I see what I can do."

He went off to the back of the shop, and I wandered to a counter to finger rolls of silk and gauze that gave off an indescribable smell, compounded of the straw matting they had been wrapped in coming from the East, of a musty

ship's hold, and of the opium-smoking dock coolies in Canton or Shanghai, or Fuchow or Tientsin.

Randall's East. But I had no interest in Oriental silks. And today I was not listening for the tinkle of laughter from behind a bamboo screen. But if I had thought for a moment Randall were there with the Chinese woman he had dared bring into port, I would have burst in on them, made whatever fantastic scene there need be, to wrest a promise he would let me talk to him aboard the *Star*.

Mrs. Gregory Spencer, losing all vestige of sanity, while she waited to know whether or not two lines of scrawled pleading could reach a murderer in time.

I could not have held on to myself for another instant if Chung Wai had not shuffled back, nodding and smiling. "I send my Number One nephew, Missie Spencer. Very fast boy with his feet," he assured me. "And please to keep money. No pay required. I am most glad to send message, most glad to do service for Captain Spencer. Captain Spencer my friend." His hands were tucked in his sleeves. He was still smiling his bland, inscrutable smile. "Captain Spencer does big favor for me. Captain bring me very nice, very beautiful present on his ship."

Did I only imagine that for a moment his eyes flicked, almost imperceptibly, toward the gallery? He was showing me to my carriage then, bowing and nodding, his smile knowing and infinitely courteous, infinitely humiliating.

When we got to Nob Hill, I told the coachman to let me out half a block from Aunty's house, and to wait for me until I came back.

"How long, ma'am?"

"I don't know. Just wait. It might be an hour. It might be two—or all afternoon."

I dreaded going into Aunty's house when I had walked

past the iron mastiffs. I dreaded, especially, climbing the hall stairs. I found I could not set foot on them. I went into the drawing room and sat down, wondering who the woman was who looked back at me from the gold-framed mirror over the mantel.

Evidently Nellie heard me come in; she hurried downstairs and suggested that Norah bring me a cup of tea.

"You need it, Miss Lilas," she insisted. "No breakfast and no lunch. That's no way to look after yourself, now, is it?"

I sat in the drawing room for an hour. Sat, or went to the front windows that looked on the street, and then came back to lift a teacup to my lips and put it down again. Nellie was finding excuses to hover. "The trunks is done, Miss Lilas," she announced cheerfully on one of her bustling trips downstairs. "All there's to do is close the lids and wait for the expressmen in the morning. They'll be around good and early, they've promised."

I got up again, and pushed aside the suffocating lace and velvet at the windows to stare along the street. The clock on the landing had long since struck four. Its steady *tick, tick*, was unbearable.

At five o'clock Norah took away the tea tray. Soon she would light the drawing-room lamps. Soon Gregory would be home. Gregory, who liked to find his wife dressed in something soft and trailing, something expensively appropriate, when she hurried to greet him with her dutiful, and of course glad, kisses.

I dragged myself upstairs and rang for Nellie. Because my new black things were packed, she got me into a gray chiffon tea gown. When the lace of its low bodice was hooked and its wide satin ribbons tied, I asked her to draw the curtains.

"Isn't it too early, Miss Lilas? There's a fine showy sunset. Take a look, why don't you? It's a treat."

I was tired of windows; tired of looking out, and waiting, and waiting. But I wandered to a window anyway, half to please Nellie, half because I couldn't sit still.

The sky seemed on fire, in spite of a heavily banked morose sea fog that had begun to move inland, and below our hill the bay water that washed at wharf pilings was molten gilt.

All those tall masts and spreading yard arms down there. All those oak and teakwood hulls. A forest of ships. And among them, the *Star of China*.

The warm smooth feel of ivory was suddenly in my palm, as persuasive and insistent as though I were again holding Randall's box.

"Bring me a cloak, Nellie. I am going out. No—don't argue. And don't just stand there." I turned from the window, aware that a decision had again been made for me, and not caring what Nellie was thinking or how concernedly she was looking at me. When she had wrapped a long mole-colored broadcloth cape around my shoulders and given me my gloves and purse, I hurried downstairs, obsessed with only one thought: "I must get out of the house before Gregory comes home." The clock on the landing struck half past five as I passed it, and at the same instant the front door bell rang. Norah answered, but I pushed her aside to snatch at an envelope a young Chinese boy held out.

"For Missie Spencer, please, from Captain Spencer."

I tore open the envelope with clumsy cold fingers. "*I am aboard the Star waiting for you. Randall.*" I had barely read the words through when I was running down Aunty's marble steps, past the iron urns, past the iron mastiffs, to

the sidewalk. Like Nellie, Norah and the Chinese boy could think what they chose. Just let me be on my way, the sooner to wake from a monstrous nightmare concerning itself with two absurdities: a rosewood chiffonier full of freshly laundered handkerchiefs and a little silver bell. Just let me reach the carriage, waiting a scant and yet endless half-block away.

It became part of the nightmare that the carriage hadn't waited—and that Gregory was running after me.

And then some one who could not possibly have been I was begging a cab driver to hurry to the docks. "Pier Ten. Quickly! As fast as you can!"

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"WHICH? WHICH?" The pendulum was swinging again. "But Gregory is my husband. My husband." I reiterated it with agonized vehemence as the driver threaded his way along the Embarcadero and onto the docks through the late-day jostling, noisy confusion of drays and express wagons and hand carts. "Gregory is my husband. And I am his devoted, loyal wife. I want to be no one else. I shall never be anyone else." Every instinct within me recoiled from the soiled, defaced image of a Randall who had been banished in disgrace, only to return a brazen, shameless stranger, caused me to cling all the more desperately to the fading illusion of a safe, unassailable world that was Aunty's house on Nob Hill. I began to pray, with my eyes closed tightly like a child's. "Not Gregory. Of those two, not Gregory. Not Gregory, on whom my life is built."

When the driver pulled up his horse at the pier where the *Star of China* lay berthed, I was huddled in a corner

of the carriage, limp and torn with indecision as to whether or not I would get out. I had been mad to come. I would be mad not to go back. Mad not to clap my hands to my ears and deafen myself to the insidious *tick, tick*, of that relentless pendulum. Now was my chance—my last chance.

I sat for a long moment, irresolute, before I made a motion toward even half turning the door handle. How quickly twilight was going. In minutes, dusk would creep along wharves, and the first wraiths of fog. And with the dock hands through for the day, how quiet and lonely the long pier ahead of me was.

Beyond its covered loading shed, where the driver had pulled up, the flimsily railed pier stretched narrowly, endlessly, out into bay water that had lost the last glint of its sunset gilding to take on a coming darkness—a somber eerie quality of depth. I had to make myself open the carriage door and step down onto the pier; and then, again, I told the driver he was to wait. I fumbled in my purse, searching with deliberate slowness for the silver dollar I gave him, and then, inanely, I asked, "Have you a wife? Does she mind if you get home late for supper?" I wanted to start him talking. I wanted him to go on, and on, garrulously, so that I would have an excuse to delay a little longer. But he was looking at me curiously, and my cowardice had only made things harder for me.

I gathered up the trailing chiffon of my skirts and walked away from the carriage toward the *Star*.

She was riding low in the water, heavy with cargo. There was a deserted look about her at first glance; neither her fo'c'sle nor cabin lamps had yet been lighted. But as I boarded her and made my way aft, I saw Randall coming to meet me.

He gave me one of his elaborately mocking bows, one of the cool, somehow subtly amused smiles I found so derisive, so hateful.

"This is delightful, Cousin Lilas." The faintly emphasized *cousin* was amused, too. "You have no idea how often I've wondered if I would see you before I sail. It's only a matter of days now. My crew is ashore for a last leave. Did you come to say good-by? Or was it the old lure of the docks—an overwhelming urge to sniff copra and tar, that brought you back for another one of your little visits?"

If my face was white, if my eyes were distraught, Randall ignored it as he ushered me into the captain's cabin. "Sit down, won't you? And may I give you a glass of sherry or Madeira?"

"No. No, I . . ." He was unfastening the clasp of my cape without waiting for a by-your-leave. The palms of my gloves were all at once wet. I couldn't swallow. To have his hands at my throat, his strong long-fingered, beautiful Spencer hands, and to know I was alone on the *Star*, alone in a dusk-shadowed cabin, with a man I suspected of murder, a man who had to be a murderer, was to long to turn and run. There was still time. He had given me a second precious chance with his taunting "Did you come to say good-by?" And how blessedly easy to snatch at reprieve with a quiet, "Yes; for Aunty's sake, the sake of old times, this is a good-by." Let him sail. Wasn't it what I had longed for ever since he came back? Let him sail, and let the wind that filled the *Star's* canvas blow before it all my dangerous nightmare doubts, my insane suspicions.

Gregory and I free of him. Our marriage safe. Safe except for the *tick, tick*, of a clock on Aunty's stair landing. Would a swinging pendulum keep on asking a question, even though the *Star of China's* sails were billowing and

her prow was cutting a course to the East? Would I listen?
Would I let myself stand in the hall and listen?

"Your note was flattering in the extreme, dear cousin. Don't tell me I'm to have the unexpected pleasure of doing you some small favor? Gregory hasn't sent you by any chance to wheedle that pair of snuff bottles from me? But no, I don't suppose so. The note had a certain—shall we say, personal?—slant to it, now I think of it."

"I have come for only one reason." It was too late to run now. I couldn't run; not on the legs trembling under chiffon flounces. My mouth was dry. I struggled to bring out words that stuck in my throat. "Tell me the truth, Randall." It was what Aunty had asked of him once a long time ago, I remembered with sickened clarity. "The truth about Rosie."

"About Rosie?" Only the merest hint of off-guard surprise crossed Randall's face before he raised a politely protesting eyebrow. "Surely we could find a more attractive subject of conversation? Not that she didn't have her charms. But why bring that particular story to light again? A bit awkward for everyone. And a little late for discussion, isn't it? After all, you've known everything there was to know about her accident for years, haven't you, Lilas? Eight years, to be exact?"

"But it wasn't an accident. You know it wasn't." I cried it out passionately, stirred to a reckless courage stronger than terror by his cold, callous mockery. "It was—it was murder."

"Murder?" Quick alert wariness flickered in the gray sardonic eyes, and for all the unperturbed coolness with which he echoed me, there was a hint of swift calculation, a kind of feeling out in his voice. "Murder? Hardly a word to use lightly, I should think. You interest me. Just what

do you mean, Lilas? Rosie slipped. Rosie had a fall."

"Don't pretend. Don't lie—as you lied to Aunty. It's no use. Rosie was murdered. And we all know why, Randall." The words were a nausea in my throat. "Wrenn saw she was—was pregnant when he found her on the rocks. Her dress wet with spray and—and clinging." The awfulness of what I had to go on with was unspeakable, and yet I said it. "There were finger marks on her throat, her head was —hurt. She had been strangled—and pushed—and left for the tide."

"Christ Almighty!" Randall's dark face was suddenly livid with fury. He drew a deep breath and slowly let it out. "They told you that when I went away?"

"Aunty couldn't." My voice shook. "She couldn't bear to, ever. She only told me there had been an accident, and about her—arrangements—with Wrenn."

"Arrangements?"

"She paid him to—to take Rosie away—and not talk."

"Are you trying to say there was no inquest, no burial certificate?"

I nodded, mute, seeing again, in Aunty's carriage, a lolling-headed Rosie.

"So that's how Aunt Edith managed, is it? I used to wonder—and with a certain amount of concern, I might add." Randall's laugh was short, ugly. "You've heard of extradition papers? They were one more reason to jump ship when the *Star* put in at Canton. I didn't know the law, but I wasn't taking any chances until I found out for certain whether the whole thing would blow over. I had an idea Aunt Edith would find some way to hush it up, with all that money of hers—though I can't say I ever pictured our old friend Wrenn in the role of gravedigger. But go on, Lilas: when did you hear the rest of it?" Randall's mouth curled. "The unpleasant, unedited facts."

"Not until—not until you came back."

"And who told you?" The eyes pinning mine were like bright steel.

"Gregory."

"Gregory?" Randall repeated it slowly, reflectively. "That's interesting. Very. And if he says Rosie was pregnant and murdered, it's doubtless true." The brilliant hard eyes were sardonic. "But I don't quite understand: since Gregory has made it all an open book, why was there any question in your mind, Lilas, and why did you come to me with it?"

"Because." The thud of my heart was louder to me than the ceaseless lap, lap of bay water against the *Star*'s hull. I was no longer aboard ship. I was in a bedroom hung with dark crimson, where a pale moon showed me a chiffonier and the tranquil face of the man who slept so quietly, so close, beside me.

The sharp scratch of a match, a whiff of kerosene, brought me back to the *Star*. Randall was lighting a lamp.

"Why, Lilas?"

He was only a blur, a shadow against shadows, in the thickening dusk until the wick caught, but with a springing, bright flare of yellow light, the shadows dissolved. There was the glint of a brass chronometer and of a tin canister that held pilot biscuit. The pages of an open log-book gleamed whitely. A sea chest took shape. As suddenly, Randall was outlined for me. And standing there, distinct, unmistakable, against the bulkhead of a captain's cabin that two children had once called ours, he was a Randall no longer a stranger.

"Because I knew you couldn't have done it." It burst from me irrationally. "You didn't do it. It wasn't you."

"No, Lilas."

The question a swinging pendulum had asked was

answered. But those two words, spoken with infinite pity and yet with something of contempt, left me to stare again, and dizzy and shuddering, over a cliff edge. Down. Down. Down to jagged rocks.

"But you went out, that last night!" I was trying to draw back, trying not to look, snatching at any thin frayed rope. "I heard you. I heard the wind bells. And you wouldn't tell Aunty where."

"Do you think she'd have believed me? And there were two of us who used the back stairs, Lilas."

"No!"

Must Randall, too, take it step by step? Oh, horrible, horrible, to let him go over it. Gregory was my husband. Whoever had done it, not Gregory, any more than Randall.

"Two of us." Randall repeated it quietly, steadily. "The minute the house settled down, after dinner, I went to Chinatown. I had learned to play fan-tan. I had a run of luck, and it was late when I got back. But when I was in bed and almost asleep, I heard the wind bells, too, Lilas."

That soft second jangle—then it hadn't been an echo.

"I heard a doorknob turn, and I imagined him even more relieved to get safely to his room than I had been to reach mine. It was the first time for him on the back stairs; he had come and gone as he chose, with a front door key, all summer, while Aunt Edith and you were in Menlo Park; but that night——"

"Don't!" I covered my face with my hands.

"Do you by any chance remember what Aunt Edith said to him when we—the three of us—went up to bed? Supposedly to bed, rather?" The compassion was there still, in Randall's voice, and almost a gentleness, but he put the question inexorably.

I could not answer. I was envying Aunty, envying Rosie.

"They are dead," I thought dully. "Dead, and done with horrors."

"And will you just bolt the front door, dear . . . ?" Wasn't that it, Lilas? ". . . bolt the front door . . . and put on the chain. . . . I intend to finish this tedious drawn-work if I have to sit here all night." If he had made plans, what alternative did he have, after that, but to use the back stairs?"

"Plans?" My palms were clammy again as I asked it.

"Driven-to-the-wall plans if Rosie had been foolish enough to importune or threaten. And it was his final chance to quiet her before he left for Harvard. Evidently she wasn't amenable."

"It's all impossible! Fantastic. How do you know, how can you say there was anything between them?" I was clutching again, desperately, at the parting, thin strands of that frayed rope. "There was nothing about her that could make him care. She wasn't his sort." I could see her in her "best" dress, her sleazy bright pink silk.

"Not care, no. You're quite right. But for an experiment, an erotic novel little experiment with a girl outside his own sphere? That's something else again, Lilas. And she was ripe for it; I'd see her come out of his room, and then there was always some hurried excuse that Teena had sent her to dust or mop."

"But the cove? He wouldn't have gone—he hadn't been near it for years."

"Need he have forgotten it necessarily? It was secluded, private. They would have wanted some such place. And when she became an embarrassment and he determined to get rid of her, could he have chosen a better?"

He and Rosie. Those two, lying on the sand on a half-moon cove. And then he and I, lying in a bedroom where the cry of a gull was a woman's fog-muffled scream.

Down. Down. The last strand of rope gave way. I fought a dreadful sick giddiness again. Down—like Rosie. Rosie, with arms as white as blanc de chine. Rosie plummeting. Rosie dead, her throat bruised, her head bloodied by jagged spray-wet rocks.

But someone else was dead, too. "Aunty! Aunty—not just Rosie." I was close to hysteria as I gasped it. "Her bell. He . . . the night she died. She couldn't reach. It was moved!"

"Her bell? What bell?" Randall's questions cut sharply across my incoherent stammering.

"Her little silver call bell. The bell on her bed table. She couldn't ring." I was shaking uncontrollably.

"What do you mean? What are you getting at?" Randall demanded with swift harshness.

"It was moved—her little bell." I babbled it, half sobbing, and twisting my hands. "She wanted Nellie—anyone. But she couldn't reach. She tried. Her arm—she had put out her arm. Oh, don't you see? Rosie and Aunty both, because they were in his way. Aunty was thinking back—going over it. He was afraid."

Randall's eyes were grim. "If he moved that bell, he's capable of anything. What's to keep him from trying his luck again? Aren't you in his way too?"

Appalled, I knew Randall had crystallized and brought out into the open an unformulated secret fear I had lived with for days.

"He was always an egotist, always convinced of his own cleverness. These two particular successes could prove heady. You happen to be a very rich woman, Lilas, and it occurs to me he'd like those company shares of yours. It would be worth another risk. His the Spencer kingdom, his the power, his the glory—if he got his hands on them."

But it wasn't the shares. I had offered them to him. Not the shares, nor anything else Aunty had left me. It was my questions. The probing. My keeping at him about Randall. And my finding him out in one lie, already. Randall's mother. But he had found a way. We were going to Del Monte.

The cabin was spinning.

Rosie and I. Blanc de chine and white jade. The blanc de chine already discarded and smashed. . . .

My legs sagged. Randall caught me and thrust me into a chair. Quickly he unstopped a decanter on the cabin dining table and filled a glass that he forced to my lips. "Get hold of yourself, Lilas. You've got to. This will help. Drink it."

"No." I pushed away the glass. The wine spilled on my tea gown.

I struggled to my feet. I tried to pull my cape around me, tried to manage my train as I stumbled in a panic of haste toward the door.

"Lilas! Wait!" Randall was ahead of me, barring the way, a hand closing on my arm. "Are you out of your mind? Where are you going?"

"Anywhere! Anywhere before he finds me—before I have to look at him."

"And you think he'd come here? Why should he?"

"He'll ask Norah and Nellie where I went. Norah knows you sent a message. He'll guess. Let me go! Please!"

"But go where? That's what I'm asking, Lilas. The hotels won't want you—not the decent ones—alone, and without luggage. You'll have to stay here, whether you like or not, until I have a chance to think."

"I can't! I can't! And the Kingstons will take me. Just let me go."

"I'm afraid it's too late." Randall's hand had dropped from my arm. "Listen."

There was a sound of hooves along the wooden pier and a rumble of wheels, and then the hard abrupt pulling up of a carriage and pair at the *Star*'s gangplank.

"I knew he would come! I told you. What shall I do?"

"Nothing. You will have to leave this to me, Lilas. I'll handle it—somehow."

"But he'll kill you, too," I cried wildly. "He hates you. He's jealous. He has always been jealous——"

"Of exactly what, Lilas? Our mutual and undeviating devotion?" Randall's faint smile was tinged with its habitual mockery. I had no answer, and there would have been no time for one; rapid footsteps crossed the deck and were coming aft, and at a quick, peremptory knock at the cabin door, I clenched my hands.

"Come in," Randall called quietly.

Gregory's narrow mouth was tight as he faced us, but his dark eyes were fathomless. They swept me with a single glance at the cape slipping from my bare shoulders, the wine spilled on my tea gown, and then ignored me.

"You will excuse my intrusion?" he asked Randall with cold formality. "I have come to take my wife home. It's late. I had a not unnatural anxiety. And may I say I hardly consider a drive to the wharves in a hired carriage, alone, after dark, and a tête-à-tête aboard an empty ship, the most discreet of suggestions for you to have made her?"

"It *is* late." Randall conceded it smoothly. "My apologies if your dinner hour has been delayed. As far as what you chose to call a tête-à-tête goes, the *Star* struck me as a rather suitable meeting ground, since Lilas and I had a good deal to talk about—to catch up on, as it were."

"Indeed?" Gregory's eyes were still masked, but I was

weak with horror again as he turned to me. "I shall be interested in hearing more about your little chat when we get home, Lilas. And as you have more than overstayed the usual time for a call, shall we go now? Let me help you with your cape."

He started to put it around my shoulders, and at his nearness my skin crawled. "No! I . . . Please, Gregory!" I murmured it weakly, and Randall, almost imperceptibly, was moving closer to me, his gray eyes never off Gregory, when there were footsteps on the deck again, heavy and clumsy, stumbling through the dark, and another knock at the cabin door.

"You're there, are you, Mr. Gregory? It's me, sir, Wrenn."

He pushed the door open and stood, framed, on the threshold, a squat toadlike figure of one more monstrous nightmare.

"It's the hack driver on the pier, sir, what sent me after you. He wants to know if he should wait. Says he brought a lady."

The cabin reeked of his horrible breath. He was trying, determinedly, to hold himself steady as he blinked his blue, hard little eyes against the sudden brightness of lamp-light.

"Pay him, and tell him he's not needed any longer."

"I prefer him to stay, Gregory, if you don't mind." It was Randall interrupting quickly.

"Just as you like." Gregory shrugged. "You heard, Wrenn? The man is to wait. But Mrs. Spencer will be driving home with me, and we are leaving now."

His attention swung back to me. "Come, Lilas."

"No!" I shrank back against the bulkhead. "No!"

A flush of sudden open anger, as violent and revealing

as the rage that had betrayed him once before in Aunty's library, stained his face. His fingers were on the clasp of my cape, as Randall's had been, but they were pressing hard, in punishment, and with a deliberate possessiveness.

I gasped. And then, incredibly, Wrenn lurched toward Gregory's turned back with a fist raised and an inarticulate oath that was like a growl.

"Take yer bloody hands off her!"

A Spencer with his hands of a strangler close around the throat of a cringing girl. Was that what Wrenn saw? And had my protesting, terrified gasp been a scream in his ears?

Gregory whirled and caught at Wrenn's arm before the fist, huge in its coachman's leather gauntlet, crashed against his jaw. "You fool! You drunken fool. What do you think you are doing? What got into you?" He demanded it with haughty incredulous wrath that a besotted servant should dare put a hand on him. Nothing more—on the surface.

My aghast eyes had flown to Randall; an explosion may as well have rocked the cabin. But Randall's finger was instantly on his lips, warning me to silence, warning me to wait, to see.

Wrenn was swaying and hiccupping. His whisky-glazed eyes, squinting against the lamplight, stared stupidly at Gregory, and then wavered to Randall's impassive face.

"Go back to your horses. I'll talk to you later."

"Very good, sir." Wrenn touched his cockaded hat with automatic obedience. Mr. Gregory's voice giving orders? Master Gregory's voice? Whatever it was that got through to his befuddled consciousness, he was again the servile correct Wrenn who once, as Aunty used pleasantly to remind herself, had driven for a London baronet.

He had his uncertainties still, however; before he sham-

bled out of the cabin, the blinking, stupid little blue eyes in the tallowy face wavered once more between Gregory and Randall. After that they swung to me, fixing themselves on my throat, as though in some maudlin search for finger marks that weren't there, and on the bodice of my tea gown, whose dark blotches of spilled wine could have been remembered, dreadful blotches on sleazy silk. Pink clinging silk.

He was not satisfied even then, and hesitating in the doorway, he looked back again before he hiccupped his unsteady way along the deck to the gangplank.

Unperturbed, and behind a mask once more, Gregory offered me his arm. We might have been in Aunty's drawing room, putting down our after-dinner liqueur and brandy glasses, drawing on our gloves, to leave for a play. "You are ready, Lilas?"

"Isn't it fairly obvious she doesn't want to go with you?" Randall put the question bluntly, but Gregory chose to smile.

"Poor Lilas. It's Wrenn's tippling that frightens her. She has never entirely shared my confidence in his ability to handle horses no matter how many pulls he's had at a bottle."

"Whatever her reason, she will drive back to Nob Hill with me, Gregory." It was an inarguable statement. Randall's voice was level and as steely as his eyes. "If you are leaving, she and I will follow and meet you at Aunt Edith's. It occurs to me I have as much to discuss with you as I had with Lilas—and a number of things to settle between us before I sail."

"My dear Randall! Must you sound so portentous? My curiosity is enormous. Of course come along to the house if you like. And I shall be delighted to have you escort my

timid wife, if she prefers a cab to her own carriage. There is just one thing, however. We shan't want you to keep us up too late—shall we, Lilas? After all, we have an early start to make for Del Monte in the morning, and Lilas needs her rest. She seems not to have been sleeping as well as she might lately. And she is altogether too beautiful for me to permit shadows under her eyes."

The thin curve of his smile was for me now; he was my husband, making my face flame with the intimacy of his innuendoes. A connoisseur, too, evaluating publicly a cabinet piece, boasting of ownership. And as he turned away, his own eyes bright with a glitter of scornful, silent laughter, he was clever, clever Gregory Spencer, still arrogantly certain his kingdom would come, still convinced he could manipulate any circumstance, control any situation.

When he had gone, Randall crossed the cabin to turn down the lamp, and I shrank closer against the bulkhead. "I can't go back to Aunty's. I can't."

"There is no need to, Lilas. I shall leave you at the Kingstons', and then I'll have it out with Gregory."

"What can you say to him? How can you get at him? There's nothing for proof."

"Not a shred of anything. I agree. But I'm not especially interested in a verbal satisfaction. And whatever happens between Gregory and me, I want to have happen in Aunt Edith's drawing room." The smile on Randall's mouth, as narrow as Gregory's, was only an ugly stretching of his lips. "As long as I can remember, I've wondered if those mirrors would ever reflect the truth."

The truth. The truth I had begged for. The truth that would shatter the falsifying glass of Aunty's mirrors to splinters. But in the end, what purpose would it have served? Where was the gain?

Gregory would only laugh again, knowing the glass could be swept up and replaced. Unless—unless Randall took his turn at killing. . . . And if he did . . .

I was trembling with a new fear that had nothing in it of concern for myself as I let Randall lead me, dazed and numbly acquiescent, out of the captain's cabin, along the deck, and down the gangplank. Aunty's carriage loomed at the foot of it, shrouded in thick fog.

The dim glow of its silver lamps showed me Gregory getting in; I heard his curt, "Home, Wrenn. Mrs. Spencer will come with Captain Spencer," and the slam of the door.

Wrenn, on the box, hunched in his greatcoat, was holding the horses on a tight checkrein. Their heads were high, fretting and tossing against the cut of steel bits.

The livery-stable cab had pulled up just behind Aunty's carriage, waiting for Wrenn to wheel, and turn, and as Randall opened the door for me, Wrenn's grip tightened on the reins and he reached for his whip. Suddenly he was standing. With a vicious, swishing lash he brought the whip down hard across the chestnuts' backs.

I saw the startled mettlesome horses plunge into their collars, I saw them break and run before they disappeared in blotting-out fog.

Did Wrenn in his drunkenness think he was headed toward the Embarcadero, and home? Or—dear heaven!—did he mean to jump?

An instant's heavy, hollow pounding of hooves. A shout. Then a shattering crash and the impact of a hurtling dragging-down fall. And after that, silence at the fog-hidden pier end, where ripples of black deep closing-over water washed against the pilings.

26

CAN I EVER FORGET Randall's urgent cries for help? The quick answering shouts all along the waterfront, the running feet, the bob of lanterns? The shrill blast of a fireboat whistle? The raying arc of fog-dimmed searchlights, beamed from ships and tugs and barges?

Randall got me off the pier as soon as the first hastily manned small boats were launched for rescue. I was gagging, retching, when we reached Aunty's front door. Norah and Nellie ran for basins and towels. Some one fetched Dr. Mason, and there were sedatives to swallow.

The hall blurred. Faces and voices blurred. Randall, chafing my cold hands, was lost to me in nothingness.

I was put to bed and my drugged sleep lasted until daylight; vaguely I remember my own voice crying out, and Nellie, in her flannel dressing gown and nightcap, patting my hand with a "Now, now, Miss Lilas, poor lamb," and giving me something more to swallow.

The morning was a blank I cannot fill in, but toward

late afternoon I wakened, fully conscious. I was in the bedroom that had been mine as a child and that Aunty had "done over" in pretty, dainty dotted Swiss for my eighteenth birthday.

Randall was sitting by the bed. He was haggard and exhausted-looking. There was nothing about the deep lines cut on each side of his mouth, nothing about his eyes, to remind me either of a boy I had known ten years ago or the mocking man who had sailed back from China.

I struggled up on my pillows. "I'm awake. Tell me! Is he dead?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad. Glad."

Recollection, detailed recollection, flooded back.

"And Wrenn?"

"Dead, too."

"Rosie was in the *Star's* cabin," I whispered brokenly.
"Wrenn saw her."

"I know, Lilas."

"He saw her being strangled—Gregory's hands!"

"Yes."

"He killed Gregory deliberately? And he couldn't jump in time?"

"There's no certain answer to any of it. I've asked myself a hundred questions since it happened. One, more often than the others. It strikes me he was too thick-witted—too drunk—to have grasped all of it in that one, single flash—to see it, accept it, change his whole concept, and then to act. No. But mightn't he have come to suspect Gregory years ago? Almost at once, after Aunt Edith sent me off?"

"How? Why?"

"Couldn't Teena have guessed something of what had

gone on between Gregory and Rosie that summer, and dropped disapproving comments? And what about livery-stable talk? Loose sly hints? Gregory had to hire some sort of rig for those drives to the cove. And something else. Young Master Gregory was cock of the walk. He always had been. Very much the eldest son sort of thing. Milord. And Rosie's logical choice between us, to Wrenn's kind of mind. You see his reasoning?"

"But to stay on, if he knew? To stay on, and let you . . ."

"I'm not saying *knew*. I'm saying, 'had his suspicions.' And he was recompensed, wasn't he? And not only in cash. Weren't both Spencer boys paying, one way or another?" Randall shrugged. "What more could he ask than holding a whip over both of us?"

"It's too hideous! Aunty and I and Gregory driving with him—Aunty so proud of her smart English coachman. The hypocrisy, the ugliness . . ."

"A filthy crafty old man, covering up filth, to play both ends against the middle: it's not an improbable summing up. And if he knew about Gregory, something else is explained—why he didn't strike out at me, one way or the other, trying to retaliate, when I came back. But we could speculate endlessly."

Randall went to the dressing table that was all girlish ruffles and blue bows and picked up a newspaper.

"They got out an extra. This is the afternoon final."

There were front page headlines: "LATE DETAILS OF PIER ACCIDENT," and a long column.

Aunty's lashed plunging chestnuts had crashed blindly through the fog into a guardrail and gone off the edge of the pier, dragging the carriage with them. Gregory had been trapped; his body was recovered only after divers had forced the jammed carriage doors.

Wrenn, catapulted from his box, had fallen across the carriage pole between the thrashing, struggling horses, and had drowned, tangled in their traces.

" . . . A cab driver, and Captain Randall Spencer, eye witnesses of the accident, testified to the Coroner's Office that in their opinion the coachman could only have been under the influence of liquor, and confused in his sense of direction. Captain Spencer added that his cousins, the late Mr. Spencer and Mrs. Spencer, had been guests aboard his ship, the *Star of China*, immediately preceding the accident, and he was to escort Mrs. Spencer home while Mr. Spencer stopped at his office for a brief errand before joining them for dinner at the family residence on Nob Hill.

"The widow of the deceased was prostrated by shock and is under the care of a physician. Final arrangements have not been completed, but it is expected that funeral services for Mr. Spencer, whose remains are presently at his home, will be held privately at Trinity Church, with interment to follow in the Spencer vault at Laurel Hill Cemetery. The offices of Spencer and Company, Ltd., will be closed in memoriam on the day of his funeral, and all Company ships will fly their house flags at half-mast. Mr. Spencer's untimely death is a grievous blow to both the business and social world of San Francisco. The Editor of this newspaper takes the opportunity to express to the widow of the deceased, not only his own sympathy for her bereavement, but the sympathy of the entire community, and deep regret at the tragic loss of so esteemed a citizen."

I read it all before I let the paper slip to the floor.

"Need he have been brought here?"

"I did it for Aunt Edith, Lilas."

"And must he be with her—later?"

"Yes."

"I won't have it."

"Call it the close of a chapter, Lilas. A last thing either of us could do for Aunt Edith. She would want it, even if . . ."

"Even if she had seen him with his hand on her bell?"

"Yes, being Aunt Edith. And remember, there is no proof. Not for that, or for the other. You said it yourself."

The house was full of wreaths and crosses again. Calling cards heaped the silver tray on the front-hall table. I stayed shut away, seeing no one but Randall.

I didn't say any good-by to Gregory before they took him away from the crimson-hung shuttered bedroom where the sound of a soughing wind in the trees was the sound of waves, breaking on jagged rocks at the cove. I didn't go to his funeral. But I heard his coffin carried along the hall and down high steep stairs, past the clock on the landing with its *tick, tick*.

Afterward, Randall came back and sat in my room again, and I asked him a question that I had wanted an answer to ever since I begged the truth from him aboard the *Star*.

"Why did you let Aunty send you away? Why did you leave Aunty and me alone, knowing what he was? How could you do it to us?"

"I knew very little about him actually, and I had nothing against him except a growing resentment for his arrogance. Jealousy for his perfection, and for his clever, adroit way with Aunt Edith. A distaste, yes, for his dirty little affair with Rosie; it made me ashamed for him. She wasn't fair game. But beyond that"—Randall shrugged—"to me, too, Rosie's death was 'an accident.' I took Aunt Edith's word for it, just as you did. I realized he had got himself into an extremely tight nasty corner, and I knew

how he would use those shells, tied in my handkerchief—it was the luck of a lifetime for him. But murder? It never entered my head."

"You could have stood up to Aunty. You could have made her believe you."

"How? By telling mucky tales? No. At seventeen, schoolboys live by certain codes. Call them callow, call them absurd, if you will. But the codes exist. Beside, I was proud. Too proud to defend myself. I had hated Aunt Edith every day of that rotten cooped-up tutor-spoiled summer in town: you'll never understand how utterly I despised her when she stood there in my room that night with her damnable biased sureness. 'Randall responsible. No one else, possibly, but Randall. And Randall lying.' She made it plain enough." Randall's mouth twisted with bitterness. "I had never lied to anyone, ever. 'If she wants it that way, prefers it that way, if she has made her choice between the two of us, let her have it,' I told myself. And when she said she was sending me to China, I snatched at the chance. I was too young to see how I was playing into Gregory's hands. Too young to see what I was handing him on a silver platter: Spencer and Company all for himself. No one pressing at his heels on the rungs behind him while he climbed to the top. And no one standing between him and you, Lilas, when the time was ripe." Randall's mouth twisted again. "Why wouldn't I have snatched at that astounding chance? What was there to keep me here? You can hardly say I was leaving anything of trust or loyalty or affection behind, can you? Perhaps you remember those two days before I sailed?"

"Don't."

"I waited for you to knock at my door. I left it open at night when the others were asleep, so that if you slipped

across the hall, no one would hear the knob turning. But you didn't come. And you weren't on the dock. You could have been there; you could have managed somehow—if you had wanted—no matter how hard Aunt Edith might have tried to hold you back."

Slow hot tears began to seep through my eyelids. Tears for a child, sobbing her heart out in this same room, eight years ago.

"I went below when the pilot boat came along to tow us into midstream." Randall's gray eyes ignored my tears. "You had always promised you would wave until the *Star* was out of sight when a day came that I sailed through the Gate. And I had promised to wave. But that night, lying in my bunk in the fo'c'sle, I reminded myself you had never been very brave. All hurts heal eventually, though, I suppose. Or at least, a scab forms. The voyage out was something of an analgesic; after that, there was China. And it was my China—the East I had waited for."

"Why did you come back?"

"Because for all my hate and hurt—my contempt—I was never free of any of you, no matter how hard I tried to cut every link that existed between my life and Aunt Edith's life, your life, Lilas, and Gregory's. And when a six-month-old newspaper came my way, by merest chance, in a Shanghai club, and I read about your marriage, it struck me it might be highly entertaining to have another look at all three of you, living so sacrosanct and smug on Nob Hill. You wouldn't enjoy having me turn up. I would be Randall, a thorn in your side. Randall, the awkward reminder that even the Spencers of Nob Hill had soiled linen that could prove extremely unattractive if it were washed in public. It would surprise you, Lilas, my anticipation of that voyage home, all for the purpose of making

you writhe. Aunt Edith having to make the best of it and giving me the run of the house again. Gregory on edge, not knowing what I'd tell or wouldn't tell, or whether I'd come to demand he move over and make room in Spencer Company. And you, Lilas—you a little sorry for being a coward before I sailed away again. The presents I brought were all part of the cat-and-mouse game I intended to enjoy."

I saw him in Aunty's drawing room the night he came back. I saw his mocking bow, the taunt of his smile.

"You chose the presents with a purpose?"

"Yes. 'The wind bells are a way to make Lilas think back,' I told myself. 'She'll remember those other, first, wind bells I gave Aunt Edith from Chinatown. She will remember what we were to each other as children. She will think back to that last night, when it ended—because she chose Aunt Edith and Gregory. And if she heard me go out and come back, as she often had, she may have heard some one else. Perhaps she will begin to wonder a little. Two boys on the back stairs? Gregory the Good indulging in night excursions as well as Randall, the Black Sheep?' You can see for yourself the possibilities my little game opened up, Lilas? And I would have the sport of watching."

"Why did you bring the finches?"

"To deprive Aunt Edith of what I was certain was her heart's desire: that she forget me. Did she remember me when they sang? They were the next best thing to a cageful of parrots or myna birds squawking my name, morning, noon, and night." Randall broke off abruptly. "The game, as far as Aunt Edith's part in it was concerned, proved a good deal less amusing than I had anticipated. I hadn't expected to find her so changed. Fixed and im-

perishable: it was my only picture of her. And by dying, she managed to flick me on the raw a second time. Curious, the hurt, the void. I would have sworn I had nothing left for her but my hate."

"At the end, she knew there had been a dreadful mistake. She was trying to puzzle it through." My lips shook. "Someday I will tell you."

It was a long moment before I could steady my voice.

"My wedding present—my box—you had a reason for choosing it, too?"

"You didn't guess? I bought it hoping it might speak for itself."

"Boxes within boxes." I murmured as though I were reciting a letter-perfect lesson, and the warm feel of ivory was against my palm again. "Each lidded over. Each elaborately carved on the inside. Each separate, and yet part of an intricate whole, like our Spencer lives. And the elaborate disclosures when you take a really good look inside."

"Yes. And when you open the final box, you reach the core, Lilas." Randall came over to my chair and knelt down and put his arms around me.

"For us, half the core is truth. The truth you asked me for in the captain's cabin. The other half is love. And it is my turn to do the asking. When I sail for China, will you come with me?"

"How can you still care?"

"I never stopped. I couldn't, underneath, no matter how hard I tried."

His closeness was heaven. The sudden sweetness of his stern harsh mouth, a miracle. I put out an unbelieving hand to trace the curve of his lips, the plane of a thin dark cheek. I touched his black hair.

"You came back for me," I whispered, marveling. "You promised, and you came back."

"Be very sure, Lilas, before you give me your answer. Decide carefully. The gods say, 'Take what you like from life—but pay for it.' And wasn't it the thought of a price that used to frighten you when we were children?"

Aunty's Lilas. I could see her face pressed to a window, looking out on a dark street. How she had longed to know what the night was like! The luring, mysterious night outside, beyond the safe familiar radius of nursery lamplight.

Aunty's timid irresolute Lilas.

If this time I chose Randall and was aboard the *Star* when she sailed, there could be no looking back. The choosing would be irrevocable. And life would never be easy, never without its complexities, lived with Randall, whose subtle and forever entralling mistress was the East, just as Kuan Yin, with her benign, enigmatic smile, was his goddess.

How could I ever plumb the shallowest depths of his world? How could he understand any part of mine, where the patterned security of lace curtains and plush and prayers said to Loving Eye looking down from the sky still kept a tenuous hold on me?

And yet Randall and I were moon and tide to each other. The pulling and the pulled. With his arms around me, with his lips seeking mine, I knew it, ecstatically, passionately. And, wordless, I gave him my answer.

Later, in that incongruously girlish, virginal blue-and-white bedroom, we made our plans. Plans that were a single plan fundamentally: we would sail for China on the earliest possible day.

After that? The river trade? The coastal trade? Or Spencer and Company, Ltd., carried on, with its ships call-

ing Canton and Fu Chow and Tientsin their home ports? Nothing was finally decided.

We took only the Kingstons into our confidence. Whatever their shock at hearing how soon I was to be remarried, and whether or not they were aware of muddy depths best left unstirred, they expressed only an enormous kindness.

Mrs. Kingston shopped for me hurriedly, quietly, so that I might have clothes that were neither black for Aunty, nor the black of a widow's weeds. And in my name, she sent out the cards of acknowledgment that Nob Hill invariably sent out for sympathy expressed after a death. Correct cards, with the widest of mourning borders.

I gave Judge Kingston my power of attorney, and he accepted the charge of all my affairs.

I asked him to sell Aunty's house. I only wished it would burn to the ground or somehow be toppled from its high hill. The Spencer family's fine proud house. But what of the shallow, sweet jangle of draft-stirred painted glass strips that always, I think, will drift through an upper hall? What of a gull's cry, to be heard in the master bedroom even when the shutters are closed?

And the stable. A rustle of straw forever, surely, under the hooves of two drowned chestnuts. The swish of a whip.

How many buyers will there be? How often will the house change hands? How long will tenants care to stay, I wonder?

The furnishings of the house were to be auctioned. Mrs. Kingston was to give away whatever I left behind in the wardrobes and bureau drawers. I wanted nothing that had been part of my trousseau.

Three weeks after Gregory's death I slipped out of Aunty's house and went aboard the *Star of China*. I had said good-bys to Nellie and Norah and Teena, and to Lew and Sang, and told them where I was going.

Randall and I were married in the captain's cabin just before the *Star* sailed on the afternoon tide. A wharf chaplain read the service. Judge and Mrs. Kingston witnessed it.

My wedding dress was wave green.

I didn't want flowers.

My ring was a circlet of moonstones.

The Kingstons went ashore as soon as Randall had put it on my finger.

The end of so much. A final severance.

I was glade that a seaman chose the moment to carry my portmanteau into the cabin. When he had gone, Randall, with his hand over mine, glanced toward the sea chest. "It is empty, Lilas, if you would like it for your dresses. Tell me—you have never asked me about—her. You are not going to?"

"No." My answer was quiet. "Whatever she was to you, I know it is finished, done."

"She belonged to old Chung Wai. He contracted for her through a Shanghai marriage broker, and I agreed to bring her back—smuggle her in. Whatever the immigration law, she would be better off a thousand times, in my eyes, as Chung Wai's wife, breeding the sons he wanted, than ending in a gutter as most singsong girls do."

"And if you had been caught?"

"I didn't weigh the consequences. She was exquisite. Young. I preferred not to think what she would look like half starved. Broken. Diseased. And I knew the ropes. I knew I could get her ashore somehow. The silks were commissioned by Chung Wai, too, Lilas. And when I asked you to come aboard the *Star* for tea that first afternoon, I hoped to even scores for what you flung in my face the night I dined with you and Gregory and we went to the Palace. I lost my fondness for green years ago. I dislike it as in-

tensely as I have grown to dislike the sea. Both remind me of a coward and a liar." Ah, Lilas. Lilas. You had not forgotten the brocades a bragging boy once promised to bring you, and you had not forgotten the cove. But you believed every word you had been told about that boy and Rosie. You think it didn't get under my skin? And when you let the lid of the chest slam down and ran from the cabin, I saw how successfully I had struck back. I laughed. And to laugh was why I had sailed home."

Randall left me, then, to go on deck and clear his sailing papers with the port authorities, and I began to unpack with a childish anticipatory delight.

My clothes in the sea chest. My clothes where white duck, brass-buttoned jackets used to be stowed, and charts, and binoculars.

Eagerly I opened the chest. But for all its emptiness, a breath of frangipani and musk lingered, stronger than its own waft of camphorwood.

The forgetting of Poppy Mouth would not be effortless. Was that part of a demanded price? "Exquisite." "Young." Randall, with his bitterness, his scores to even, was human. A man. And the voyage from Canton had been long.

If I had questions to ask, they were questions to ask only of myself. If I had wonderings, they were private. And with the coming of night, they dissolved.

Randall and I stood in the prow of the *Star*. His mouth, hard against mine, was salt with the salt of the open sea that rimmed the *Star's* figurehead. A glorious freeing gale had begun to blow; a gale I had always known would blow.

It had filled the *Star's* white, billowing canvas. It was carrying Randall and me to Cathay. Our Cathay.

The End

